Depraved Borderlands

Moenandar, Sjoerd-Jeroen

For A.G. Moenandar-Zwaart

A border is only interesting when it separates something that cannot really be separated, so that a border separates, but does this in such a way that it forces us to perceive the separated parts together […]. If the border is an 'until-here-and-no-further' on one level, it always wants to be crossed on another.

Sven Erik Larsen

'The' Dutch does not exist.

Princess Máxima of the Netherlands

There is no such thing as the *Muslim.*

Reza Aslan

Preface

With budget cuts taking place in the arts and in academic scholarship for the arts throughout Europe, a book such as this may be in more need of an explanation than, say, a book titled *The Rules of Management*. At a time when academic scholarship may only exist if it can prove its social relevance or its use-value, it seems important to offer the reader a good reason to keep reading.

As I say in the conclusion of this study, an analysis of literary works will tell us very little about actually existing society. It may, however, give us a profound insight into the dreams and nightmares of that particular society, into what people are hoping for and what they are afraid of. Thus, they give us an insight, not into what is going on, but into how what is going on may be be experienced, suffered, endured and enjoyed. Moreover, as works of fantasy and imagination, they enable authors and readers to think beyond what is possible at any given moment in time. While a clash of civilisations between 'the West' and 'the Muslim world' is increasingly presented as inevitable, as the almost natural outcome of the fact that there are such categories as 'the West' and 'the Muslim world', it may be fantasy, i.e. the ability to think beyond what is natural, that could provide us with a way out of the deadlock.

The clash between 'Islam' and 'the West' did not start with 9/11, but that event certainly epitomised it. Arguably, the fall-out of the September 2001 terrorist attacks was nowhere as intense as it was in the Netherlands. Many looked on in surprise while a country that was once viewed as one of the most progressive, liberal and tolerant in the world saw the rise of a strongly anti-Islamic discourse, which led to death threats and even two high profile murders. Multiculturalism was repeatedly declared dead and nationalistic populism became a leading force in Dutch national politics. However, although it may have been most intense in the Netherlands, this process took place all over the Western world. Anti-Islamic, right-wing populism is on the rise everywhere, as is its Islamist, anti-Western counterpart. Thus, an analysis of encounters with Muslims in Dutch literature and the public debate is relevant not only for the Dutch, but for all who are interested in relationships between Western societies and their Muslim communities.

A note on the translations of the original Dutch texts used in this study. Most of the texts discussed here have not been translated into English. Except in those cases where there is an existing literary English translation, I have translated the Dutch texts myself. In addition to these translations, the original Dutch text is always provided, either in footnotes or, in the case of longer citations from liter-

ary texts, preceding the English translation, for easy reference and for the convenience of those readers who understand Dutch. Two novels by Kader Abdolah (*My Father's Notebook* and *The House of the Mosque*), a novel and a theatre text by Abdelkader Benali (*Wedding by the Sea* and *Yasser*) and a collection of short stories by Hafid Bouazza (*Abdullah's Feet*) have all been translated into English. For these texts I have only cited the English translation, although I sometimes comment on the nature of the translation using the Dutch source text. In the case of Benali's *Yasser*, there is an English translation that has not been officially published, but that was used by theatre company Studio Dubbelagent for staging the play. For this text, I provide the page numbers of the original Dutch text in addition to the page numbers of this English translation. To enhance the readability of the text, I always refer to the publications of these authors using an English title. This is either my own translation of the original title or the title under which an English translation was published. In both cases, I give the original title of the work between brackets when it is mentioned for the first time in a chapter.

This book contains an adaptation of my PhD thesis and as such, benefited greatly from the supervision I received as a PhD student from my *promotores*, Liesbeth Korthals Altes and Els Jongeneel. Their supervision was stimulating, encouraging, inspiring, strict – but most of all *generous*. I cannot thank them enough for their willingness to listen, debate, contradict, to spend time on my project. I have learned much from them about being a part of the academic community as a researcher and a teacher. Beyond the direct supervision of these two colleagues, I have also benefited from the contact with all my other colleagues at the Arts, Culture and Media department at the University of Groningen. I would especially like to mention by name Kristin McGee, Barend van Heusden, Annie van den Oever and Pascal Gielen. Furthermore, I thank the students of this department that I taught while I was working on this study, especially the students of my comparative literature classes: you have been an important source of ideas for me.

I was given several opportunities to spend time at academic institutes abroad, which enabled me to work on this study and to debate its contents with foreign colleagues and students. This book is better than it would have been without this and I would like to thank the following people for making these stays possible: Adrienn Diossi and her colleagues at the Department of Dutch Studies at Károli Gáspár University in Budapest; director Fokke Gerritsen and his colleagues at the Netherlands Institute in Turkey, Istanbul; Taco van der Zwaag and his colleagues at the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Damascus, Syria; and the 2009 members of CS Kuwait.

This book has had two excellent editors. Thessa Lageman contributed greatly to its readability with her fine sense for structure, and was an important source of knowledge about the Arab language and modern Muslim fundamentalist thinking. For this and for many more things I am grateful to her. I have always counted myself lucky to have Rebecca Cooke as my English language editor, but for this project she certainly went beyond what one could reasonably expect of an editor, for which I thank her wholeheartedly.

I would like to express my gratefulness to my parents here as well, to my father who gave me a love for stories and to my mother, who gave me a love for literature. Their pride and encouragement have always accompanied me.

Finally, I would of course like to thank the authors: Kader Abdolah, Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza and Robert Anker. Michel Foucault once compared the academic praxis with the work of the Spanish inquisition. According to Foucault, every academic is ultimately a sadist who will torture his or her research object until 'knowledge' is squeezed out of it. Dear authors, if at times my analyses of your text strike you as… unexpected, please remember what Monty Python said: "*No one* expects the Spanish inquisition!"

This book is dedicated to the loving memory of my eyang putri, but also to two dear friends who, like my eyang putri so many years ago, decided to enter the depraved borderland between East and West to search for love: Özgür Bozkurt and Efi Panagou, who, as I hope, will create their own Utopia right where they are.

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1. Introduction

Us and them – I'm fed up to the back teeth with that whole debate. All the attention for those Muslims, their prophet, and their holy book, all those endless analyses, opinions and talks, can't we switch to another subject?

Apparently not.

Martin Bril

1. "Only one subject that really matters"

In the autumn of 2003, writer Nico Dros published an essay in a Dutch literary magazine called *Tirade*, which opens with the following lines:

> For a writer who wants to deal with politics these days, there can only be one subject that really matters: the relationship between Islam and Western society. Yet, so far, few Dutch authors have dared to touch this sore spot.[1]

Dros called Moroccan-born Hafid Bouazza a "pleasant exception", but Bouazza was not the only author publishing in the Netherlands who has taken up this subject. Bouazza's literary work certainly offers a number of striking representations of relations between 'Islam' and 'the West', such as his second novel, *Salomon* (2001), in which a barbarous Muslim invades the house of a Dutchman and drives him insane. However, Kader Abdolah's *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles* (*De reis van de lege flessen*, 1997) was published even earlier: in this book, a naïve Muslim woman from Iran visits her son, a refugee living in the Netherlands, and is shocked when she sees the two men who live next door making love to each other in front of the open window. In the theatre text *Unclean* (*Onrein*, 2003), written by Abdelkader Benali, a dog resembling the populist politician Pim Fortuyn, known for his criticism of Islam, invades the house of an embittered fundamentalist Muslim. And Robert Anker's novel *Hajar and Daan* (*Hajar en Daan*, 2004) features a love story between a Dutch man and a Moroccan girl that is presented as a contemporary *Romeo and Juliet*, with 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' as Capulets and Montagues.

These are not just random examples. In the short stories, novels, poetry and theatre texts written by these four authors, the 'relationship between Islam and Western society' is a recurrent theme, most often represented as clashing civilisations and multicultural tragedies. In this study I will analyse the encounters

1 "Voor een schrijver die zich in deze dagen met politiek wil bezighouden is er eigenlijk maar één onderwerp dat er werkelijk toe doet: de verhouding van de islam tot de westerse samenleving. Toch zijn er tot nu toe weinig Nederlandse schrijvers die zich aan deze smeulende kwestie de vingers hebben willen branden." Nico Dros, "Over schrijverschap en politiek" (2003): 48.

between Muslim and non-Muslim characters, as well as the juxtaposition of 'Islam' and 'the West', in these authors' works published between 1990 and 2005. I will discuss how they used their work to experiment with dichotomies such as 'Muslim' and 'Dutch'. I will examine how their work relates to societal and literary contexts, such as the public debate about Islam in the Netherlands and discussions in the literary field about literature and engagement. I will especially pay attention to the ways in which the specific literary forms of these works have made such experiments possible. What do these literary encounters say or suggest about Muslims and non-Muslims? In other words, what identities are constructed for Muslims and non-Muslims in these representations and what are the underlying convictions? What do these works suggest about the possibility or impossibility of contact between Islamic and non-Islamic people?

2. Basic assumptions for this study

This study will concentrate on the fifteen years between 1990 and 2005. This was a transitional period for the Netherlands, during which the perception of Islam shifted from a primarily foreign phenomenon to a local issue. At the same time, the relationships between the original Dutch population and immigrants from countries with a Muslim culture (often referred to as 'Dutch' and 'Muslims', suggesting that these two categories are necessarily exclusive) became more and more strained. The title of Samuel Huntington's famous work, *The Clash of Civilizations*, became a central phrase as public discussions focused on whether the presence of hundreds of thousands of Muslims would lead to cultural collisions or not.[2] As I will discuss in Section 4, that question was increasingly answered in the affirmative, in a heated nationwide debate that was fanned by, among other events, the aftermath of the Rushdie affair (1989), the El Moumni affair[3], the 9/11 attacks and the murder of filmmaker and infamous critic of Islam Theo van Gogh (2004).

2 This is actually a reduction of the contents of Huntington's book: *The Clash of Civilizations* does not just deal with the conflict between the Muslim world and the West. Huntington claims that since the last decade of the twentieth century, the world has consisted of eight civilisations (Western, Latin-American, African, Muslim, Chinese, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese). Huntington's book mainly examines the relationships between each of these civilisations and the West. The Chinese and the Muslim civilisations were singled out as the most important rivals of Western civilisation. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (2002 [1997]): passim.

3 Khalid el Moumni, a Moroccan imam in Rotterdam, caused a national uproar in 2001 with his remarks that Westerners were lower than pigs and dogs because they tolerated homosexuality.

While the supposed 'clash of civilisations' increasingly became the topic of conversation on the streets, radio and television talk shows and in the op-eds of national newspapers and magazines, the authors that I will discuss in this study used these social dynamics as the raw material for their literary work. That this would happen seems obvious – and not just because writers feel a need to, as Nico Dros phrased it, "deal with politics". An encounter that leads to friction is, after all, the ideal material for an enticing story, with characters that the reader will identify with and care for: communication breakdowns and problematic encounters make up much, if not most, of world literature.[4] And few encounters are as rife with communication breakdowns and the resulting friction as those between 'the West' and 'the Muslim world', 'Muslims and Dutch', the 'Islamic' and the 'Western', between 'East' and 'West', or whatever terms have been used to describe these particular clashing civilisations.

In the representations of encounters between 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims' or the 'Islamic' and 'non-Islamic,' it is especially likely that the contours of these two categories will appear and the borders between them will be explored. Descriptions of encounters have always played an important role in attempts to shape and contain confrontations between different cultures. They are often informed by the conviction that there is a fundamental difference between the juxtaposed cultures, while at the same time confirming this same conviction. According to Edward Said, for instance, such descriptions are a quintessential part of Western conceptions of the East, in which the latter is represented as inferior. In his classic study on the subject, *Orientalism*, Said shows how Western descriptions of encounters between representatives of East and West approach the Orient "almost in the manner of an audience seeing a dramatic event unfold".[5] According to Said, the supposed fundamental difference between the Orient and the West appears clearest in representations of these two worlds' encounters – and this is exactly the purpose that these representations implicitly serve: "both East and West fulfil their destinies in the encounter".[6] The same is true the other way around, as shown in Occidentalism (studies on Eastern conceptions of the West).[7]

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4 Cf. Lisa Zunshine, "Introduction. What Is Cognitive Cultural Studies?" (2010): 24.

5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1995 [1978]): 137.

6 Ibidem.

7 Cf. for instance James G. Carrier, *Occidentalism. Images of the West* (1995), a collection of anthropological studies on Occidentalism among both Westerners themselves and non-Western people; and Ian Buruma & Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism. The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (2004), a polemically phrased but well-researched overview of Occidentalism (mostly in the form of hatred towards the West) since the Second World War.

In the descriptions of these encounters, a dichotomy is stated: the world consists of East and West. This becomes the basic assumption for a world view in which these categories are presented as natural and fundamentally different. The dichotomy then serves to create a distinction between that which belongs to 'us' and that which belongs to 'them'. In such a world view, the identity of 'us', the self, is completely dependent on 'the Other', as the Indian literary critic Gayatri Spivak, following Jacques Lacan, has called it. The Other is everything that the self is not, and that which the self is cannot be the Other. Such a dichotomy makes those whom we assume do not belong to our own culture, literally 'aliens', representatives of the 'not-self'. At the same time, and here we recognise the Freudian origins of Spivak's concept, this Other is the manifestation of the self's repressed desires, fears and frustrations. Spivak calls this process, in which the unwanted is exorcised by attributing it to an Other, "othering".

The main question in this study is how this othering takes place in the texts that will be analysed. However, it is important to note that this study does not conceive of othering as a process in which a difference is produced between a (Western) self and a (non-Western) other. After all, who would be the 'self' and who would be 'the Other' in the literature produced in a multicultural society such as the Netherlands between 1990 and 2005? One of the most important effects of a multicultural society may well be that its members are continuously confronted with the realisation that there is always someone for whom they are an Other.

In this study, I have aimed to analyse how these Others are made. How, for instance, have 'Dutch' and 'Muslims' been imagined to be fundamentally and mutually exclusive categories, and how have they been made into each other's Others (or not). Thus, othering is conceived of here as a continuous negotiation of the borders between the categories of possible dichotomies. It is used in the sense of an almost Heideggerian verb: 'to other' is to continuously produce otherness, creating 'Others' in the process. We will see that in many of the short stories, novels and theatre texts discussed in this study; unlike the encounters in the works of the Orientalists that Said writes about, these only serve to show that 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'. Indeed, that definite dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' often seems to be deconstructed in surprising ways that expose a process of othering in which 'Muslims' and 'Dutch', when confronted with each other, are also confronted with each other's Other (i.e. their selves as produced by the Other).

One of this study's basic assumptions is that literary texts show what is found to be important in the culture from which they stem, and how what is important is made meaningful (and vice versa). To a certain extent, literary texts published between 1990 and 2005 that included encounters between Muslims

and non-Muslims were necessarily charged by current events. After all, words always call forth certain connotations, since the reader will remember other texts in which the same words or the issue they address were found. The reader will automatically make connections between these texts, resulting in what Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian scholar of literature and linguistics, has called "dialogicity": "the word, directed towards the object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment".[8] That goes for all words and their objects, but, I would say, even more so for heavily charged words like 'Muslim' and the concept it referred to in the Netherlands around the turn of the century.

With Bakhtin's notion of dialogicity as a starting point, the literary can be used to explain the non-literary and vice versa. They can, as the American New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt phrases it, be made into each other's "thick description": by confronting them with each other, "a network of framing intentions and cultural meanings" can be constructed, which can then be used to interpret literary and social phenomena.[9] This study can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct the dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment in which literary texts came about, by reading those texts in combination with contributions from the social and literary debates.[10] Such a reconstruction would, of course, first and foremost betray the limitations of the scholar creating it – after all, he or she is the one linking one text to another, departing from his or her own knowledge and insights. Yet, a careful and informed analysis of the ways in which authors (consciously or subconsciously) let certain discourses on 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims' echo in their literary work and the ways in which this enables the literary work to show and explore the limits of what a 'Muslim' or a 'Dutch' person is, can give us meaningful insights into the cultural matrix from which these texts stem. These insights show us what the members of the society in which these works were created deemed 'realistic', but also what they feared and wished for when it comes to the coexistence of 'Islam' and 'the West'.

"Something happens to objects, beliefs and practices when they are represented, reimagined and performed in literary texts," wrote Stephen Greenblatt in an essay on the concept of culture, "something often unpredictable and disturbing…"[11] This study is an attempt to trace that "something" by analysing how a

8 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986): 276.

9 "The greatest challenge lay […] in making the literary and the non-literary seem to be each other's thick description." Catherine Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (2001): 40.

10 Bakhtin formulates the aim of such a reconstruction as coming to "an understanding of the dialogue of languages as it exists in a given era". Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986): 417.

11 Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture" (1995): 230-1.

particular author has dealt with the same subjects, convictions and acts in different genres and media. Therefore, when looking for case studies, I selected authors who have not only been active as producers of literary texts, but who have also spoken out on the literary and societal consequences of the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands in op-eds, interviews and essays.

Furthermore, the oeuvre of each of these authors will not be studied in isolation: I will try to pinpoint the medium-specific ways in which the literary work relates to literary and public debates by reading it, wherever relevant, together with contributions to those debates by others. I will discuss my methods in the next chapter, after which I will present the case studies in four consecutive chapters, analysing each author's contributions to public and literary debates, as well as their literary works. The remainder of this introduction discusses why I selected these four authors for my case studies (Section 5) and sketches the societal and literary contexts of their works (Sections 3 and 4).

3. Societal context

Unlike countries such as France and England, the Netherlands never had to deal with large groups of Muslim immigrants from former colonies: only a few Muslims from the Moluccas in the 1950s (former soldiers of the Royal Dutch Indies Army in Indonesia) and some Javanese and Indian-Pakistani Muslims from Surinam in the 1970s settled in the Netherlands.[12] The largest influx of Muslim

12 The Moluccans who settled in the Netherlands after the decolonisation of Indonesia were members of the Dutch colonial army (KNIL) who were ordered to relocate, with their families, to the Netherlands after a failed attempt to create an independent Republic of Southern Maluku (RMS). While the Indonesian army swiftly dismantled the RMS and its armed forces (which consisted mostly of former KNIL soldiers), the Moluccan contingent of the Dutch colonial army and their families were shipped to the Netherlands, reportedly to wait for a solution to their situation. The result was arguably the Netherlands' worst postcolonial trauma, as a solution that satisfied those who supported the Republic of Southern Maluku was never reached and those who had come to the Netherlands either did not want to return to what was now the Republic of Indonesia or could not do so because they were affiliated with the RMS. Meanwhile, until far into the 1970s, the Moluccans in the Netherlands were told that their stay was expected to be temporary while they and their children were kept in camps (some of them former Nazi concentration camps) and locked out of the labour market. Things came to a head in the mid-1970s when several desperate members of the second generation of Moluccans in the Netherlands attempted to create the republic their parents had dreamt of by means of violence and performed a series of bloody train hijackings. The large majority of these Moluccan expatriates were Christian (in fact, a distrust of a Javanese Muslim-dominated Indonesia was one of the main motives behind the RMS declaration of independence), but there was a minority of Muslims among them.

migrants came with the 'guest workers' from the Mediterranean area: Turks, Moroccans and Tunisians who, together with Greeks, Portugese, Spaniards and Italians, came to the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards for work, mainly manual labour. Later, the families of these guest workers joined them.[13] As the term 'guest worker' implies, the general expectation at the time was that the presence of these economic migrants would be temporary. However, during the 1980s and 90s it became clear that many of them had settled in the Netherlands for good.

The 'guest worker' or 'alien'[14] of yesteryear increasingly became an *allochtone*, a word unique to the Netherlands with a meaning that is not always clear. According to the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS), the term *allochtone* refers to everyone who lives in the Netherlands but was born abroad, or who has at least one parent who was born abroad. The CBS differentiates between non-Western *allochtones* and Western *allochtones*.[15] However, the word is rarely used in its broader sense and refers almost exclusively to people of non-Western descent. Moreover, the word *allochtone* has increasingly acquired the connotation of 'Muslim'.[16] The latter might be explained by the fact that the largest

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People from Java and the former British colony that comprised today's India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were brought as contract workers (the term suggests a voluntary agreement between more or less equal parties, which was rarely the case; sometimes the passage amounted to little more than a kidnapping) to Surinam's plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Many of them migrated to the Netherlands in the decades following Surinamese independence. Most Javanese in the Surinam colony were Muslim; most of the migrants originating from the British subcontinental colony, called Hindostanis ('hindostanen'), were Hindu, but there was a Muslim minority among them. This has led to some confusion in the Netherlands, where many people do not differ between 'Hindostani' ('hindostaans', viz. a member of the ethnic community) and Hindustani (of 'hindoestaans', viz. a member of the religious community), calling all of them Hindustani – often resulting in surprise when there is talk of a Hindustani Muslim.

13 W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld, *Islam in Nederland en België* (2008): 22-23.

14 Dutch: '*vreemdeling*', which could also mean 'stranger' or 'foreigner'. I use 'alien' here because this translation seems to convey best the legal and societal connotations of the Dutch term.

15 http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/methoden/begrippen/alfabet/a/default.htm, last visited on 31 January 2007.

16 Cf. for instance, a report by one of the leading Dutch institutes for social research, TNS/NIPO, commissioned by one of the main Dutch newspapers (*de Volkskrant*) in 2004, in which the terms '*allochtone*' and 'Muslim' are used completely interchangeably (TNS/NIPO, Gevoelens van autochtone Nederlanders t.o.v. allochtonen/moslims [Sentiments of *autochtonous* Dutch regarding *allochtones*/Muslims – *autochtonous* being the opposite of *allochtonous*] (2004)).

group of these permanent migrants, which was later increased by refugees who mainly came from countries in Africa and the Middle East, is of Muslim descent.

The use of these terms can be regarded as a societal example of othering: the non-Dutch identity of these 'aliens' is stressed by the terms with which they are designated. This comment is not meant to 'expose' Dutch society as xenophobic; each society has its 'aliens' and its mechanisms to make those 'aliens' alien. However, the 'Islamisation of the *allochtone*' is part of a dichotomy that plays an increasing role in Dutch society with 'Dutch' at one end and 'Muslim' on the other. It seems that Muslims are seen as alien to Dutch society to such an extent that they have become the alien *par excellence*.

Since the early 1990s, there has been an ongoing nationwide debate about these ultimate aliens in modern Dutch society. As Said showed in *Orientalism*, that debate has century-old roots in Western cultural history. Moreover, it has been strongly informed by certain events during the second half of the twentieth century, such as the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians (which has increasingly been represented as a religious conflict), the 1973 oil crisis and the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Since the late 1980s, however, when the presence of large groups of Muslims started to gain a permanent character, growing attention has been paid to Islam as a part of Dutch society. International events such as the turmoil surrounding Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 and onwards and the second Gulf War in 1991 have had noticeable local repercussions.[17] For the first time in Dutch history, Muslims manifested themselves in the public space, sometimes testifying to religious and ethnic loyalties that were previously unheard of.[18] At the same time, migrants from countries with a predominantly Muslim culture started to organise themselves along ethnic and religious lines.[19] The result of all of this was a growing awareness, around 1990, that Islam had become a local phenomenon.

As noted above, the period between 1990 and 2005 can be seen as a transitional phase during which the country tried to negotiate a space for this new local phenomenon. Popular belief suggests that it only became possible to discuss Islam's place in the Netherlands after 9/11; it also suggests that this discussion was "taboo" in the 1990s, often explained as the result of an oppressive "politically correct discourse".[20] However, as sociologist Baukje Prins pointed out in

17 Ruud Stijp, "Moslims in Nederland en België" (2001): 415.

18 Ibidem.

19 Ibidem: 409-412.

20 "[P]olitiek correct discours." Baukje Prins, "Het lef om taboes te doorbreken. Nieuw realisme in het Nederlandse discours over multiculturalisme" (2002): 241. For a good example of this myth, cf. the foreword in *Mist in de polder. Zicht op ontwikkelingen*

an article on "the Dutch discourse on multiculturalism", this was a myth rather than a realistic representation of affairs.

The main character in that myth was the well-known Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, a flamboyant and charismatic populist leader whose political career suddenly skyrocketed in the wake of 9/11, when he made himself the voice of Dutch popular distrust of Islam and the Muslim minority in the Netherlands.[21] Fortuyn, many would argue, "said what we were not allowed to say".[22] Nonetheless, Prins explained how, ever since the late 1980s, many people had addressed, often and outspokenly, the problems that were supposed to result from mass immigration.[23] Long before Pim Fortuyn, other critics of a multicultural society had claimed that there is a fundamental difference between "European society and her most important values" and "the Muslim world", a difference that would inevitably lead to clashes if the integration of minorities was not "dealt with boldly".[24] One notable example that Prins mentions is Frits Bolkestein, leader of the conservative liberal party VVD. According to Prins, Bolkestein, who was strongly critical of the presence of Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands throughout the 1990s, was an important representative of the "new realism" (as she calls this tough discourse on Islam and mass immigration).

One could argue, however, that since the turn of the century, the confrontation of opinions in the public debate about the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands has been much fiercer than before. Prins remarks that "nowhere in Eu-

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omtrent de islam in Nederland, a 2009 collection of essays in which the editors claim that "Until 2001, Islam was rarely discussed, while it has become a hot issue since 9/11 and the rise of Pim Fortuyn in Dutch politics" ("Werd er tot 2001 in het publieke debat nauwelijks over gesproken, sinds 9/11 en de opkomst van Pim Fortuyn in de Nederlandse politiek is de islam een *hot issue*"). Sipco Vellenga et al., "Inleiding" (2009): 7.

21 Fortuyn was murdered by an environmental activist on 6 May 2002, just before his party, List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), won 29 seats in the Netherlands' 150-seat parliament in that year's national elections. That was a remarkable victory, all the more impressive since Fortuyn's party had not existed until February that same year, when Fortuyn was removed as leader of the populist party Leefbaar Nederland (Livable Netherlands) for calling Islam a "backwards culture".

22 "[Fortuyn] had gezegd wat wij niet mochten zeggen." Baukje Prins, "Het lef om taboes te doorbreken. Nieuw realisme in het Nederlandse discours over multiculturalisme" (2002): 241.

23 Ibidem: 243-245.

24 "[D]e Europese beschaving en haar belangrijkste waarden [en] de wereld van de islam"; "de integratie van minderheden [moet] met lef [...] worden aagepakt." Ibidem: 243. Here, Prins cites liberal political leader Frits Bolkestein whom she portrays as an important representative of the "new realism", as she calls this discourse on Islam and mass immigration.

rope [has] there [been] a stronger release of public distrust towards Islam than in the Netherlands" after the 9/11 attacks.[25] One explanation for this is that earlier in 2001 the Netherlands had already had two widely hyped affairs connected with Islam. In January, there had been the "issue of Aisha", as one journalist called the vicissitudes surrounding an opera called *Aisha and the wives from Medina* (*Aïsja en de vrouwen van Medina*): director Gerrit Timmers of the theatre group Onafhankelijk Toneel had cancelled this opera after outraged Muslims protested against the fact that it would portray the wives of the prophet Mohammed onstage. This led to a vehement debate about the extent to which freedom of expression in the Netherlands was being jeopardised by Muslims.[26] Two months later, Imam Khalid el Moumni's statements about homosexuality led to great turmoil.

The public's fierce reactions to El Moumni's remarks and the cancellation of *Aisha and the wives from Medina* can be easily linked with the aftermath of the publication, a year earlier, of an infamous op-ed called "The Multicultural Tragedy" ("Het multiculturele drama") by sociologist and public intellectual Paul Scheffer. Scheffer claimed that the integration of *allochtones* had failed and that it was necessary to firmly deal with anti-Western sentiments among them. Scheffer's op-ed paid much attention to Islam, which he claimed was a source of the "resentfulness towards society" felt by Muslims in the Netherlands.[27] Scheffer received "many positive responses" from public intellectuals who felt that the time had come to "have an unrestricted and candid conversation beyond the dominance of 'politically correct reflexes'".[28]

In other words, during the months preceding the 9/11 attacks, public opinion in the Netherlands was primed for the "release of public distrust" that Prins mentions. Over the following years, this resulted in an increasingly radicalising debate in which the tone was set by critics of Islam such as Pim Fortuyn, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders, who represented the 'clash of civilisations' as an inevitable fact.[29] This debate was fanned by national and international events, as

25 "De terroristische aanvallen [...] om 2001 hebben vermoedelijk nergens anders in Europa tot een grotere ontlading van openbaar wantrouwen tegenover de islam geleid dan in Nederland." Baukje Prins, "Het lef om taboes te doorbreken" (2002): 241.

26 Cf. for instance, Fred de Vries, "Aisja tekent cultureel dilemma" (2001).

27 "[H]aatdragendheid tegenover de samenleving." Paul Scheffer, "Het multiculturele drama" (2000).

28 "[V]olop positieve respons"; "[men was] blij dat het eindelijk mogelijk was een vrije en openhartige conversatie te voeren zonder dat 'politiek-correcte reflexen' de overhand kregen." Baukje Prins, "Het lef om taboes te doorbreken" (2002): 246.

29 Martijn de Koning, "Understanding Dutch Islam" (2009): 186. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali-born political scientist who first worked for the Research Institute of the Dutch La-

well as the presence of an increasingly visible group of radical fundamentalist Muslims in the Netherlands. One result was the spectacular rise of new political parties such as Pim Fortuyn's eponymous List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) and Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) that have created a distinct profile for themselves through election campaigns in which they promised to take a tough position on problems surrounding Muslims in the Netherlands.[30]

However, the central issue in the public debate on the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands has remained the same throughout the years: "to which extent can there be religious diversity"?[31] It is striking to note how it is often unclear (even, it seems, to the debate participants themselves) whether they are talking about the religion called Islam or the way of life of immigrants and *allochtones*. However, we can discern two positions among them. First, there is the view that Islam supplements Dutch society. Opinions may vary on whether this supplement is an enrichment or not, but Islam is seen as something that, in principle, has a right to exist in the Netherlands without adaptation. Second, there is the view that Islam has to be neutralised. This view comes in different forms. It can be stressed, for instance, that Muslims have a right to live in the Netherlands, but if they choose to do so, they will have to respect 'our' laws (somehow implying that this is not something that goes without saying, but requires a specific adaptation from Muslims). Another commentator may go as far as to claim that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with Dutch culture.

This second view, that Islam has to be neutralised in some way, started to gain the upper hand from the 2002 national elections onwards. By around 2005, it had gained the status of *sensus communis* in the public debate and government policies, albeit not always in its most radical form. Implying a more or less fundamental opposition between 'Islamic' and 'Dutch', the integration of Muslims in Dutch society is almost generally discussed as something that requires a forced adaptation of Muslims' cultural and religious identities.

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bour Party (PvdA) and later became a member of parliament for the Liberal Party (VVD). She gained notoriety for her fierce attacks on Islam, the religion with which she had grown up. Geert Wilders was a member of parliament for the Liberal Party who took over Pim Fortuyn's role as the Netherlands' main critic of Islam, which led to a split between him and his party. He then founded his own Freedom Party, which has won up to 24 seats in parliament during several national elections.

30 Ibidem: 186, 188-190.

31 "[I]n welke mate religieuze diversiteit de ruimte mag en kan krijgen." Jessika ter Wal, *Moslim in Nederland. Publieke discussie over de islam in Nederland* (2004): 79.

4. Literary context

The developments discussed in the last section coincided with a boom in allochtonous authors, mostly of Muslim descent. They have generally been children of guest workers who joined their fathers and settled in the Netherlands at a young age. These authors often dealt with topics such as encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims and the place of Islam in Dutch society. "Literature by 'autochtonous' authors", on the other hand, "rarely mirrored multicultural reality".[32] Thus, literature *about* 'aliens' was, to a very high extent, literature *by* 'aliens'.

4.1. Allochtonous authors

In the period between 1990 and 2005 there was great interest in work produced by allochtonous authors. This can be explained by the developments described in Section 3, which might have made the reading public curious about these new inhabitants of the Netherlands. Moreover, the authorities implemented an incentive policy for cultural expressions by migrants, which may have helped the reputations of some of these authors. This policy was aimed at encouraging "literary manifestations with an intercultural character" and the publishing of work by "allochtonous authors" in the hope that this would "stimulate the cultural participation of migrants". Partly as a result of this policy, publishing houses and literary festivals made efforts to pay attention to "migrant literature".[33] This was often explicitly linked to current affairs: in an increasingly multicultural society, access to literature was expected to have a positive effect on the integration of *allochtones* and to enrich Dutch culture.[34]

This expectation was widely shared. In critical reviews and literary studies in the 1990s, it was often stated that the works of allochtonous authors had a

32 "[D]e literatuur van 'autochtone' schrijvers [weerspiegelt] nog maar sporadisch de multiculturele werkelijkheid." Hugo Brems, *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1945-2005* (2006): 681.

33 "[L]literaire manifestaties met een intercultureel karakter"; "allochtone schrijvers"; "[Men wilde] de participatie van migranten in de cultuur stimuleren"; "migrantenliteratuur". Urszula Topolska, "Coulissen van de verschuiving. Het Nederlandse beleid ten aanzien van de zogenaamde migrantenliteratuur" (2007): 210. Tapolska's article offers a good overview of the government's incentive policy regarding "migrant literature" and a discussion of the interaction between this policy and activities within the literary field.

34 Ibidem: 208-210.

unique quality: an "allochtonous sound" or the "taste of the unknown".[35] When reading these texts, one notices how uncomplicatedly *allochtones* or migrants are presented as a homogenous group. For instance, in a 1997 article about "Turkish and Moroccan writers", Dutch literary scholar Henriëtte Louwerse wrote:

> Since the migrant contingent within Dutch society can be regarded as a sub-culture (with a distinct dress-code, religious needs, educational preferences, culinary habits etc.) it does not seem unjustified to consider them as a specific literary collective in spite of the heterogeneity of its parts. To put it in other words, a female Turkish writer from Istanbul is bound to have a different personal make-up from a young male writer from a remote rural village in Morocco, but they share the 'outsider', the 'other' element. They can be regarded as forming […] a literary context such as Jewish literature or lesbian literature.[36]

It is striking how "migrant" here seems to equal "Muslim" (which then turns out to be quite a monolithic category as well). The title of Louwerse's article reveals this perspective: "The emergence of Turkish and Moroccan writers in the Dutch literary landscape". This phrasing is in line with the fact that these national groups were often named together – almost to the extent that "Turks and Moroccans" became a term in its own right, denoting something like 'Muslim migrants' – but not with the fact that that there were practically no authors of Turkish descent active at that time (the article itself names none at all, which makes the title all the more peculiar). This 'mistake', however, was quite common among critics at the time,[37] which was arguably a sign that the literary field was being pigeonholed according to the same dichotomy between 'Dutch' and *allochtone* that could be found in the contemporary public debate, where the latter term had gained strong connotations of 'Islamic'.

That dichotomy was given a literary function and used to suggest the existence of a fruitful literary context. The "exotic new names in Dutch literature" were expected to be the source of "stories […] that are clearly different from those by autochtonous authors", as one critic wrote in 1995.[38] Thus, what can be

35 "[H]et allochone geluid." Theo Hakkert, "Hafid Bouazza verbrandt alle schepen achter zich" (1996); "[D]e smaak van het onbekende." Marion Bloem, cited in Jaap Goedegebure, "Het exotisch element" (1995).

36 Henriëtte Louwerse, "The way to the north: the emergence of Turkish and Moroccan writers in the Dutch literary landscape" (1997): 74-75.

37 Cf. for instance Rob van Erkelens, "Was hij echt een stuk ongeluk?" (1995) and Rob Schouten, "Inktmarokkanen uit achterstand" (2005).

38 "[E]xotische nieuwe namen in de Nederlandse literatuur [met] verhalen [...] die duidelijk anders [zijn] dan die van autochtone schrijvers." Jan-Hendrik Bakker, "De Nederlandse literatuur is multicultureel" (1995).

called ‘an othering of the allochtonous author’ took place, as authors with a non-Western background were presented as representatives of the ‘alien’ in Dutch literature, or as the literary voice of the Other.[39] The attention paid to these authors peaked during the 2001 Book Week, an annual event organised to highlight Dutch literature and promote the sale of books. Every year it has a special theme: in 2001, it was “writing between two cultures” in an attempt to promote the allochtonous author.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I will discuss how Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza have resisted this reception of their literature, in the context of a widely held debate on the literary relevance of an author’s ethnic and cultural background. They repeatedly compare the ways in which they are treated in the literary field with the increasing dichotomisation of Dutch society into categories such as ‘allochtonous’ and ‘autochtonous’. Their attitude is, however, quite ambiguous. Bouazza in particular seems to exaggerate the extent to which he has been exoticised, at least partly to be able to position himself as an author who has been structurally misunderstood by his critics. In any case, the public debate about the relationships between the different ethnic and cultural communities in the Netherlands can clearly be said to have influenced both the discussions about literature by allochtonous authors and literary works about encounters between Muslim and Dutch people.

4.3. Literary encounters

What was written about the relationships between Dutch society and its Muslim communities during this period in Dutch literature? And who wrote about it? In this section I will give a short overview of authors (other than the ones who will be discussed in the coming chapters) who wrote about this subject in literary works published between 1990 and 2005.

As noted, most authors who chose to deal with the subject of encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims were of Muslim descent. In 1995, Hans Sahar was one of the first allochtonous authors to publish his work: *What Do You Mean ‘Stunning’?* (*Hoezo bloedmooi?*) was a strongly autobiographical novel about the life and times of Moroccan Abi Zehir in the underworld of The Hague. He later published a second novel, *So Much Love* (*Zoveel liefde*, 1996), and a collection of short stories, *The Caravan of Homesickness* (*De heimweekaravaan*, 2000), that contained the same themes.

39 For a more in-depth discussion of these issues, cf. Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, “The evaluation and positioning of literary work by authors with a Muslim background” (2007).

Also in 1995, Naïma el Bezaz made her debut with *The Way to the North* (*De weg naar het noorden*, 1995), a report-like story about the life of an illegal Moroccan migrant in the Netherlands. Khalid Boudou wrote the successful novel *Schnitzel Paradise* (*Het schnitzelparadijs*, 2001), about a young Moroccan man working in the kitchen of what is described on the back cover as an "ultra-Dutch restaurant".[40] The book was later turned into a film and television series. Said el Haji debuted with the well-received *The Days of Shaitan* (*De dagen van Sjaitan*, 2001), a coming-of-age novel in which the young son of a Moroccan guest worker struggles with the strict Muslim environment in which he is growing up. Somali-born Yasmine Allas's first novel, *Idil, a Girl* (*Idil, een meisje*, 1998) dealt with the religiously motivated misogynous violence perpetrated against a young Somali girl who starts an affair with a Belgian expat, for which both are severely punished. The second half of her next novel, *The Six-Fingered General* (*De generaal met de zes vingers*, 2000), explored the problems faced by a Somali family settling in the Netherlands.

Sevtap Baycılı, a Turkish philosopher who moved to the Netherlands after completing her studies in Istanbul, published her second work, *The Allochtone's Nightmare* (*De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon*), in 1999. This is a fascinating fictional study of "the dreams of allochtones".[41] I will discuss this work, as well as Baycılı's authorship, more extensively in the next chapter, where I will use them as examples when discussing this study's conceptual frameworks and approach.

Most of the texts described above are stories (some quite clichéd) about immigrants who somehow have to find their place in a hostile Dutch society. In this respect, a remarkable work was published in 2004: *Man Seeking Woman to Make Him Happy* (*Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken*) by Yusuf el Halal. The back cover text describes the author: "Yusuf el Halal was born in 1978 in Bouznika, Morocco. He moved to the Netherlands when he was three.".[42] Yet, before the book went on sale it had already become known that "Yusuf el Halal" was a pseudonym for a group of famous and lesser-known Dutch authors.[43] The encounters between the book's half-heartedly Muslim main character, Yusuf el Halal, and Dutch characters are mostly sexual and are a

40 "[E]en oer-Hollands restaurant." Khalid Boudou, *Het schnitzelparadijs* (2001).

41 "[D]e dromen van allochtonen." Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999): 154.

42 "Yusuf el Halal werd in 1978 geboren in Bouznika, Marokko. Op zijn derde verhuisde zijn familie naar Nederland." Yusuf el Halal, *Man zoekt vrouw om hem gelukkig te maken* (2004).

43 Among others, well-known bestselling authors Ronald Giphart and Marcel Möring, poet Ingmar Heytze and first-time authors Ernest van der Kwast and Steven Verhelst.

smoothly written mix of explicitly erotic literature, youth culture and cultural stereotypes.

The only poet who can be named here is Mustafa Stitou. In his debut, *My Shapes* (*Mijn vormen*, 1994), "the tension between the Moroccan-Muslim and Western secular culture plays an important role", as the back cover of the 2000 reissue phrases it.[44] The same cover text claims that Stitou deals with this issue in a "sober, playful manner", which is indeed the case in his poems about disillusioned guest workers, young Moroccan boys who dream about jihad in the local supermarket and older Moroccan boys who mumble "bismillah" before they drink their beer.[45] In his third volume of poetry, *Piggy Pink Picture Postcards* (*Varkensroze ansichten*, 2003), he took up the same theme in a less direct manner. In poems like "The Alien Does Not Exist" ("De vreemdeling bestaat niet") he cites colonial passages in the work of Darwin and booklets on Islam by Christian missionaries, while in another poem "two Moroccan cunts take off with someone else's scooter".[46]

Not counting the collective of authors behind "Yusuf el Halal", it is indeed striking how few ethnic Dutch authors have written works in which encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims are a central theme. Beside *Hajar and Daan* by Robert Anker, which I will discuss in chapter 6, there is only *Leila* (1993) by Huub Beurskens, a novel about a Dutch yuppie's love for an Egyptian hooker. However, Leila's Muslim background is hardly significant in Beursken's story; *Leila* is mainly about the orientalist fascination of the main character for a hooker with whom he has no language in common and the effect this has on his relationship with Marysa, his lover and the story's narrator.

In general, encounters with Muslims in works by autochtonous authors are just part of a subplot. In Hella S. Haasse's *Key's Eye* (*Sleuteloog*, 2002), the main character, who grew up in the Dutch colony that would become Indonesia and later repatriated to the Netherlands, returns to the places of her youth. She

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44 "[D]de spanning tussen de Marokkaans-islamitische en de westerse seculiere cultuur (het karikaturale karakter van deze termen in acht genomen) speelt een belangrijke rol." Mustafa Stitou, *Mijn vormen & mijn gedichten* (2000). This is a reissue of Stitou's first two volumes of poetry, *Mijn vormen* (1994) en *Mijn gedichten* (1998).

45 "[O]p nuchtere, lichtvoetige wijze." Ibidem: 9, 32, 44. "Bismillah" is an Arabic phrase meaning "in the name of God"; it is standard Muslim practice to say it before eating, drinking or starting anything.

46 "[T]wee kutmarokkaantjes [gaan] met andermans scooter aan de haal." Mustafa Stitou, *Varkensroze ansichten* (2003): 68; 12. For an interesting analysis of this volume of poetry in the context of the Dutch public debate, cf. Jos Joosten & Thomas Vaessen, "Identiteit, evolutie en engagement. Moderniteitskritiek in de poëzie van Mustafa Stitou" (2005): 129-154.

discovers that a childhood friend has become a practicing Muslim. That development is shortly described and is one of the symptoms of the general estrangement between these two characters, one of them Dutch and the other Indo-European.[47] In *The Asylum Seeker* (*De asielzoeker*, 2003) by Arnon Grunberg, the narrator's terminally ill girlfriend marries an asylum seeker to ensure his indefinite leave to remain in the Netherlands. This asylum seeker is an Algerian Berber, but his religion is mentioned just once, implicitly, when he asks the narrator, who sits "kneeling in front of the toilet" while sick, "are you praying?"[48] In *Emoticon* by Jessica Durlacher, a central part of the plot is a rendezvous between the Muslim Aisja and the Dutch-Israeli Daniël in Palestine. However, Durlacher barely elaborates on this meeting or Aisja's background. In a few short passages, he describes how Aisja, pretending to be Jewish, arranges a date with Daniël after contacting him online; when she finally meets him, she immediately turns him over to Palestinian militants, who kill him.[49]

The encounter between the Jewish-Dutch Joop Koopman and the Moroccan-Dutch Omar van Lieshout in Leon de Winter's *God's Gym* is linked to Israel as well: the Mossad asks Koopman to keep an eye on Omar because he is said to have "met a dodgy Iraqi and be suspected of having been in contact with bombers".[50] The fact that this meeting takes place in the United States during the spring of 2001, when the Mossad claims that Omar might have been preparing for an attack, is a clear reference to 9/11. However, the relevance of this encounter to the story is limited: Omar sketchily tells his life story to Koopman and, through some hacker friends, helps him locate the girl who had received his daughter's donated heart.[51]

47 Hella S. Haasse, *Sleuteloog* (2002): 151-155.

48 "[G]geknield voor de wc"; "Ben je aan het bidden?" Arnon Grunberg, *De asielzoeker* (2003): 68. The kneeling position is part of the Muslim prayer ritual and an Algerian Berber would almost certainly be of Muslim descent.

49 Jessica Durlacher, *Emoticon* (2004): 399-413.

50 "[Hij] had een foute Irakees ontmoet en het vermoeden bestond dat hij in contact stond met bommenleggers." Leon de Winter, *God's Gym* (2002): 255.

51 Ibidem: 277-279, 286-292; 310. There are other works that were published between 1990 and 2005 and that describe encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, these other books appeared in the margins of the literary field and can nowadays only be found by accidentally coming across them in second-hand bookstores or libraries. An example would be Ronald Westerbeek's *Kaj* (1997), a novella that was distributed as a free gift in Christian bookstores during the 1997 Book Week and was published by The Christian Reading Contact (CLK).

5. This study

In selecting the authors for this research, I primarily checked the themes of their literary work. I looked for authors who have written one or more works in which encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims play a central role and whose work in general have a recurrent theme of describing encounters between characters who are explicitly presented as Muslim and non-Muslim. In the light of earlier research on similar subjects, it is important to stress that I have not selected authors according to their backgrounds. In addition, I considered the amount of attention paid to these authors and their work in national newspapers and magazines; I took this to be an indication of a certain position within the literary field and wanted to concentrate on authors who have, for whatever reason, met with response.

All four selected authors have published several novels and short stories (and, in the cases of Benali and Bouazza, theatre texts) that describe encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims. Many of their works have been repeatedly reprinted and extensively reviewed and interviewed. The authors also engaged in the public and literary debates of the time (in interviews, op-eds, columns or essays), commenting on the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands and their effects on literature and society. This was not the case for the authors I mentioned in the preceding sections (or only to a very limited extent). Many of the works I described would have been interesting for this study, but either the encounter between Islamic and non-Islamic was not a prominent enough theme, the authors were not very well known in 2005 or they took little part in the public and literary debates between 1990 and 2005.

The latter point was especially important in selecting authors for this study. By focusing on each author and his entire body of texts, the different positions in the debate on the relationships between communities in the Netherlands became discernible. It also clarified whether taking a certain position depended on the medium in which a text was written. By linking texts written by the same and different authors (such as other participants in the public debate, critics or other literary authors), attention can also be paid to the ways in which literature and public debate relate to each other. Thus, we can discern, for instance, whether discourses from the public debate are depicted and played against each other in the literary work and, if this is the case, how these function in the context of the literary work itself.

Most studies on multicultural literature published in the Netherlands have analysed the institutional embedding of allochtonous authors.[52] Although this study is an exception to that trend, it is not the first study to analyse the themes, textual aspects and relationship with the public debate in Dutch literary texts about the multicultural society of the Netherlands around the turn of the century. For instance, *New Germans, New Dutch* by Liesbeth Minnaard has the following description on its back cover:

> This book examines how literature of migration intervenes in public discourses on multiculturality in Germany and The Netherlands […]. By juxtaposing detailed analyses of literary work by the Turkish-German writers Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoglu and the Moroccan-Dutch writers Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza, *New Germans, New Dutch* offers crucial insights in the specific ways in which this literature negotiates its specific, national context of writing.[53]

Minnaard's study is an interesting exploration of the interaction between literary texts and their societal context. However, I would like to plead for a more inclusive kind of research that does not just concentrate on authors with a migrant background. If, as is claimed about Minnaard's study, the research subject is the way in which literature represents its national context and enters into a dialogue with it, then the selection criteria for the texts to be analysed should be the representations they contain rather than the author's background. After all, it would be equally interesting to analyse how cultural identities are represented in the love affair between a Dutch history teacher and his Moroccan student in Anker's *Hajar and Daan* as it would for the love affair between a Dutch girl and the son of a Moroccan guest worker in Benali's *The Long Awaited* (*De langverwachte*, 2001).

If our research only concentrates on the ways in which works by migrant authors intervene in public discourses on multiculturalism, this would suggest that the ways in which they do so is determined by their background. That is a prob-

52 Cf. Ieme van der Poel, "Literatuur-met-een-accent" (2009): 14. According to Van der Poel, this has led to a situation in which "the scholarly debate about migrant literature" ("het wetenschappelijke debat over migrantenliteratuur") in the Netherlands has remained "a mostly national pastime" ("een overwegend nationale aangelegenheid") that has not really been able to join in with "the broad, academic discussion among mainly British, American and Canadian literary critics" ("die weinig aansluiting vond bij de brede, academische discussie zoals die in het afgelopen decennium vooral door Britse, Amerikaanse en Canadese letterkundigen is gevoerd").

53 Liesbeth Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch: Literary Interventions* (2008). Henriëtte Louwerse formulates a similar basic assumption on the back cover of her monograph on Hafid Bouazza: "Bouazza […] undermines the concept of a unified culture and the wholeness of the self. He explores and exploits stereotypical beliefs held on both sides of the East-West divide." Henriëtte Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007).

lematic basic assumption: even if it were true in actual practice, it does not have to be so in principle. Taking the background of an author as the starting point of our analyses, instead of making the debate about the relevance of this background the subject of analysis, contributes to a discourse which, in the words of J.W. Scott, "not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, and homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals".[54] It would contribute to a discourse in which descent and background are taken to be an unchangeable part, or even the essence, of a person.

Following the chapter in which I will introduce this study's conceptual frameworks and approach, I will present the four case studies in chronological order. I will start with Kader Abdolah, the author who first published a literary work in which encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims played a central role. Next, I will present case studies about Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza and Robert Anker. Although the differences between these authors are often bigger than the similarities, there are a few recurring aspects in their literary work and the ways in which these authors place their work in societal and literary contexts.

One of these recurring aspects is the question of whether the subjects the authors deal with necessarily imply that they write engaged literature. The extent to which the authors consider themselves and their work to be authentic, and the importance they place on authenticity, implicitly or explicitly plays an important role in their novels, short stories and theatre texts, as well as in their contributions to public and literary debates. Another recurring aspect is a striking tendency in the works they wrote after 9/11: while the public debate about the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands hardened quickly, these authors increasingly wrote texts that included utopias or utopian situations that bridged the gaps between 'East' and 'West', 'Islamic' and 'Dutch', or 'the Muslim world' and 'the West', is bridged.

These situations are often the outcome of a dialectic plot in which the two worlds first continuously clashed. Whenever civilisations clash, they do so because there is a border between them. Only a clearly demarcated culture can collide with another culture. A border is not something that exists by itself, but is created by what is located on each side of the border in question.[55] Thus, the colliding cultures are necessarily bound together. They are, to use a term from physics, each other's 'collision partner' – a phrase that well indicates the intimacy of the relationship between the colliding parties.

54 Joan W. Scott. "The Evidence of Experience" (1991): 782.
55 Cf. Hans Lund, "Medier i samspel" (2002): 10.

In this regard, it is not surprising that ever since there have been Muslim characters in Dutch literature, the encounters with them have often been represented as love affairs.[56] In a way, such affairs are automatically a forbidden love, since the crossing of a border is a form of transgression. We can see this for instance in Benali's *The Long Awaited*. In this novel, a Moroccan boy starts an affair with a Dutch girl. His Muslim friend calls the contact between the two lovers a "depraved borderland"[57]: what religion has put asunder, let not man join together.

In any case, all these stories testify to a fascination with borders, the drawing of borders and the crossing of borders. In Abdolah's works, those borders are a painful daily reality for his characters. They find themselves mostly on the wrong side of borders: Muslim characters in the Western world and non-Muslim characters in Islamic Iran feel strongly out of place because there is hardly any space for 'alien' elements in either location. They become living illustrations of the deep gap that, according to the author, lies between East and West. In his contributions to the public debate, Abdolah also refers to this gap: time and again, he has claimed that 'Muslims' and 'Westerners' think differently, live differently and view reality differently. This can be seen as a form of promotion for his own work too: Abdolah implies that this deep gap is exactly why there is such a great need for an author like himself, who can be a bridge between 'East' and 'West'. However, since he claims that the worlds between which he and his work supposedly mediate are so fundamentally different, he undermines the credibility of such a bridge at the same time (albeit unintentionally).

While Abdolah views the border between 'the West' and 'the Muslim world' (and thus the clash between the worlds located on both sides of that border) as an inescapable reality, the other authors tend to call its definitive character into question. Like Abdolah, Benali acknowledges that the border between these two worlds causes a mutual exclusivity, but he does not make the division between them his point of departure. Indeed, the border itself is exaggerated until it becomes ridiculous in his work, and the author creates burlesque fictional worlds in which any border must, finally, evaporate.

At the same time, he finds problems with that cheerful mixing of worlds: the hybrid is something worthy to strive for in his work, yet it always remains just out of reach. In his contributions to public and literary debates, the author does something similar: he thinks it would be desirable to no longer have to choose

56 Cf. Herman Pleij's discussion of love relations between "Mohammedans" and Christians in Medieval Dutch plays, which I will refer to in my analysis of Robert Anker's work. See p. 243-244.

57 "[V]erdorven grensplaats." Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 265.

between 'Muslim' and 'Dutch', but he concludes that modern-day Dutch society continuously forces people to do so. An autonomous literature, which in Benali's case (and Bouazza's and Anker's as well) adds up to something like a literature in which the author is not expected to make "a specific message, ethics or world-view"[58] the theme of his work, offers a solution for this situation: it can function as a refuge in which people can escape such coercion.

In Bouazza's work the borders are first mental: his characters are unable to look beyond the dichotomy of 'Muslim' and 'Western' and therefore live in a world of optical illusions where they can only see stereotypes. At the same time, Bouazza deals ironically with these stereotypes in his texts, confirming and negating them alternately, which results in the destabilisation of the entire notion of borders. The border is omnipresent in his work, which mainly deals with fascination for that which is located on the other side of the border: for the 'alien', which can be imagined but can never be known. This ambiguity is also found in his contributions to public and literary debates, in which he ironically unmasks stereotypes on the one hand and on the other hand seems to hold that when 'Islam' and 'the West' meet there is nothing more available than stereotypes.

Robert Anker takes an in-between position with Benali and Bouazza on one side and Abdolah on the other. Like the first authors, he rejects any strict pigeonholing of the world. The fictional worlds in his work are postmodern and can be read as a celebration of a life without certainties, boundaries or borders. At the same time his work, like that of Abdolah, testifies to the pain and confusion resulting from a life without borders. There is great nostalgia for an authentic experience. It is not presented without a certain irony (wholly absent in Abdolah's work) but the necessity of authenticity and moral certainties is confirmed nonetheless, while Benali and Bouazza disrupt this authenticity. This results in a certain tension in Anker's literary work and his contributions to the public debate, in which embracing a postmodern, big city lifestyle is presented as the solution for the clash of civilisations.

In the article by Nico Dros I cited at the beginning of this introduction, the author seemed to assume that a writer who decides to write about "the relation of Islam to Western society" does so out of political engagement. He even goes as far as to make no distinction between Bouazza's op-eds and his literary work.[59] This contrasts strongly with the way in which most of the authors that are discussed in this study reflect upon their own work. Only Abdolah would

58 Which implies a plea for a literary field in which there would be no "more or less constraining prescriptions or appeals to the civic responsibility of writers". Gillis J. Dorleijn, Ralf Grüttemeier & Liesbeth Korthals Altes, "'The autonomy of literature': to be handled with care" (2007): xv.

59 Nico Dros, "Over schrijverschap en politiek" (2003): 48-49.

wholeheartedly agree that the author who writes about Islam also engages with politics (or, more broadly, with social issues). Benali and Bouazza, on the other hand, plead for a "literary escapism", as Dutch literary scholar Thomas Vaessens calls the opposite of an "authorship that addresses societal and political current events".[60] According to them, literature has no ties with society and when an author writes about socially relevant issues, it only has aesthetic (as opposed to social) aims.

It is, however, exactly this literary autonomy that makes literature's social role possible, especially according to Benali. For him, literature is a refuge: it offers the possibility of transcending the tensions that exist in society and creating the hybrid unity of 'Western' and 'Muslim' that the 'clash of civilisations' makes impossible. Thus, Abdolah and Benali present – albeit in contrasting ways – literature, especially their own literature, as a solution for social problems.

Bouazza, on the other hand, stresses that literature has no social role whatsoever. He extends the disrupting ambiguity and irony of his literary work – and sometimes even its fictional qualities – to his contributions to public and literary debates. Just like Benali, Bouazza's attitude suggests that the best possible contribution to the public debate is to negate the relevance of that debate: both authors unmask the dichotomy that lies at the core of it – the one between 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' – as fiction. It is in this unmasking that their literary work and their contributions to the public and literary debates come together.

Once again, Anker takes a position in between Abdolah on the one hand and Benali and Bouazza on the other. Like Abdolah, he speaks about a writer's duty to deal with social issues in his work (i.e. the necessity of engagement). However, like Bouazza and Benali, he seems to assume that the best way to do this is to write literature that takes no position.

60 "[E]en schrijverschap dat inspeelt op de maatschappelijke en politieke actualiteit." Thomas Vaessens, "De romanschrijver als journalist. Arnon Grunberg tussen fictie en non-fictie" (2010): 40.

2. Conceptual Framework and Approach

> *'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'*
>
> Lewis Carroll

1. Drunk *allochtones* do not exist

In 1999 Sevtap Baycılı published *The Allochtone's Nightmare* (*De nachmerrie van de allochtoon*), a book that is difficult to pigeonhole and that was presented by its publisher as "an irresistible carnival mirror for everyone living in the Netherlands".[1] The book contains a fictional government report in which a rather silly civil servant – with the typically Dutch name Dr de Boer – presents the findings of a research study on the nightmares of *allochtones*.[2] The aim of the research project is to create the "ideal nightmare" to stimulate the integration of *allochtones* into Dutch society.[3] Observations by the civil servant are alternated with reports on the nightmares of *allochtones*. This is done in the form of narratives written in the second person singular, or dialogues such as the following:

> *De vijftiende nachtmerrie*
>
> **Ben je dronken?**
>
> 'Ben je dronken?'
> 'Nee, ik ben allochtoon.'
> 'Oh. Ik dacht dat je dronken was.'
> 'Ik dacht het eerst ook. Maar nu weet ik wat ik ben.'
> 'Dat is knap. Zeg, waar kom je vandaan?'
> 'Uit Amsterdam.'
> 'Oh. Dat bedoelde ik niet.'

1 "[E]en onweerstaanbare lachspiegel voor alle inwoners van Nederland" was printed on a yellow wrap around the cover. Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999). The book cover did not state the book's genre and as a result it was categorised as a work of non-fiction and featured among the top ten best-selling non-fiction works in Dutch quality newspaper *Trouw* for several weeks in a row. N.N."De eerste zin van Charles Yu's Veilig leven in een science fiction wereld, vertaald door Robert Fagel" (2011). In a similar confusion of categories, the second-hand Dutch bookstore chain De Slegte regularly files *The Allochtone's Nightmare* under sociology rather than fiction.

2 For a definition of this term, see the introduction of this study, p. 7.

3 "De ideale nachtmerrie". Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999): 125.

The Fifteenth Nightmare

Are You Drunk?

'Are you drunk?'
'No, I'm an *allochtone*.'
'Oh. I thought you were drunk.'
'That's what I thought at first too. But now I know what I am.'
'That's quite clever. Say, where are you from?'
'From Amsterdam.'
'Oh. That's not what I meant.'[4]

This short chapter was cited in a review of *The Allochtone's Nightmare* to illustrate the critic's negative opinion of the book: "I can't make head or tail of it half the time".[5] And yet, what is described here is an experience any *allochtone* living in the Netherlands will know: you are seen first as an *allochtone* and not – or only at second glance – as whatever you are besides that (e.g. someone from Amsterdam). Moreover, there are certain things that an *allochtone* cannot possibly be – for instance, you cannot be drunk because *allochtones* do not drink alcohol (the fact that *allochtone* has become synonymous with 'Muslim' is a recurrent theme in Baycılı's book). What is interesting about this extract is that it shows the *allochtone* him or herself rather than a Dutch person reaching these conclusions.[6] The speaker seems to have internalised current prejudices and clichés about *allochtones* and become one with the stereotype of 'the' *allochtone*.

Turkish-born Baycılı published one other work beside *The Allochtone's Nightmare* between 1990 and 2005: *The Markov-Chain* (De Markov-keten, 1998), an experimental novel told from the perspective of a person with a mental illness.[7] Neither of her books were widely discussed by critics in national newspapers or magazines and the attention Baycılı's books did receive was negative. Apart from her literary work, Baycılı also published several op-eds, most of them in national quality newspaper *Trouw* and leftist magazine *Vrij Nederland*. These were collected in *Fire-and-brimstone Sermons. Aphorisms on the Netherlands* (*Donderpreken. Aforismen over Nederland*, 2006). Because of her marginal position in Dutch literature and her small literary output, Baycılı does not

4 Ibidem: 69.

5 "[I]k kan er vaak geen touw aan vastknopen". Miriam Piters, "De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon" (2002).

6 We know this extract deals with an encounter between a Dutch person and an *allochtone*, because this chapter is part of a section in the book titled "Conversations with the Dutch" ("In gesprek met Nederlanders").

7 Sevtap Baycılı, *De Markov-keten* (1998).

qualify for a separate case study. However, I will use her authorship and *The Allochtone's Nightmare* extensively as examples in this chapter. Her introducing public debates on migration and Islam in the Netherlands into *The Allochtone's Nightmare* and her participation in public and literary debates serve well to introduce this study's conceptual frameworks and approach. I will use several narratological and rhetorical terms and notions to analyse the literary works discussed in this thesis. These will be introduced when needed in the following chapters. The present chapter concentrates on the contexts in which I will place the literary representations of encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims and my approach for analysing the relationships between the literary works and these contexts. I will successively introduce the context of each literary work, the literary and societal context that the author creates around his or her work and the context created by the use of certain words, notions and styles that invite the reader, as it were, to link the text to other texts.

2. The literary work

The most immediate context for a literary representation of an encounter is, of course, the one formed by the literary work itself. This paragraph will mostly concentrate on how a representation derives its meaning from the way it is embedded by the text. An author can, for instance, stress that the characters are fictional by making the encounter part of an absurd and emphatically fictional report – and thereby show that the characters should not be seen as representations of reality, but rather as ironic comments about that reality.

An encounter between two characters, such as the one in *The Fifteenth Nightmare* cited above, is part of what rhetorical narratologist James Phelan calls a story's three "spheres of meaning": "the mimetic, thematic and synthetic".[8] The encounter in the mimetic sphere of meaning is an encounter between two people (characters): a Dutch person and *allochtone* are talking about drunkenness. In the thematic sphere of meaning, the encounter represents and stands for something: in this case, the extent to which the stereotype of 'the' *allochtone* determines the communication between the Dutch and *allochtones*. In the synthetic sphere of meaning, the encounter is an artificial construction and is part of the literary text: Baycılı uses the bizarre research report and the unnatural character of the dialogue to draw attention to the fact that the characters are fictional, linguistic representations.[9]

8 James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989): 9.

9 I agree with Liesbeth Korthals Altes that Phelan's terminology is problematic. If a character stands for a certain theme, this too is a form of mimesis. Cf. Liesbeth Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation. The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (forthcoming).

These different spheres of meaning can strengthen each other, but the author can also create tension by having them negate each other. Another chapter in *The Allochtone's Nightmare* tells the story of a Turkish man demanding "understanding and respect" for murdering his girlfriend and her lover after seeing them make out in front of him while he was being interrogated by the immigration police.[10] In the mimetic sphere of meaning, the character has embraced the fact that he is first and foremost considered an *allochtone*: because of his ethnic descent, he should be judged differently than a Dutch person in the same situation. However, the thematic sphere of meaning clearly shows how problematic it is when a person is treated as an *allochtone* or Turk, rather than an individual. That such treatment is questionable, is further emphasised in the synthetic sphere of meaning, where the reader is confronted with a nightmare that is phrased in the same ironic – or more precisely, black humorous – tone of voice as the rest of the book. The voice used to narrate the nightmares (second person singular) adds yet another layer of meaning: do the *allochtones* really dream these nightmares, or are the researchers writing the reports making them up based on their own prejudices? Questions like this, which arise when we consider the synthetic sphere of meaning in the work, make the book highly ambiguous. This ambiguity contrasts starkly with the black-and-white thinking that we find in the mimetic sphere of meaning, in Dr de Boer's research report, which pigeonholes people according to one of two categories: 'Dutch' or *allochtone*.

The extent to which the mimetic function of literary representations are embedded in the thematic and synthetic spheres of meaning is a matter of interpretation, of course. One critic wrote the following in her review of *The Allochtone's Nightmare*: "the short biography, which mentions the author's academic education, [clearly shows] that this woman is not just anyone. Baycili [sic] juggles with numbers and averages like someone schooled in statistics".[11] I would say, however, that it is not Baycılı's aim to present herself, but the narrator, as "someone schooled in statist". If the text says that "[r]esearch has shown that 87% of all conversations in an average *allochtone's* life are based on misunder-

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But even that is a rather limited definition of the term mimesis, which is often used to designate what Phelan calls "the synthetic aspect of a representation", which is similar to Aristotle's thinking about mimetic art, which to him was *ποιησις* above all, that is, 'a thing that has been made or modified'. Cf. David H. Richter, *The Critical Tradition* (1998): 40.

10 "[R]espect en begrip". Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999): 88-90.

11 "[U]it de beknopte biografie waarin gewag wordt gemaakt van een wetenschappelijke studie [blijkt] dat deze dame niet van de straat is. Dat laatste is af te lezen aan delen van de bundel, want Baycili [sic] goochelt met cijfers en gemiddelden als een volleerd statisticus". Daniëlle Serdijn, "De spiegel van Zeeuws Meisje" (1999).

standings (and the remaining 13% is about football)", this is not meant to show how much Baycılı knows about statistics, but rather to show that Dr M.W.A.J. de Boer's tendency (and that of the politicised field of social science that he represents) to express everything in "numbers and averages" is, in the end, useless and quite absurd.[12] Thus, the narrator is made unreliable. He addresses what narratoligist Peter Rabinowitz calls a *narrative audience*: an audience who believes that the fictional world of the story, in which the government is conducting research on the nightmares of *allochtones*, is 'real'. In opposition to this narrative audience, we have Baycılı's *authorial audience* – the hypothetical audience for whom she wrote the work – who picks up on remarks such as the one about football and realises that the story is not true knowledge but rather a parody of knowledge.

In Phelan's terms, one could say that this critic has read Baycılı's book from a mimetic perspective. I, on the other hand, would say that the tone and absurd setting call for a more thematic reading. The difference between a narrative audience and an authorial audience plays an important role here, because it enables the book to function as "an irresistible carnival mirror for people living in the Netherlands". The author addresses readers who, like her, do not believe the government's reports or research about "the average *allochtone*" could ever produce anything worthwhile (or are at least open to that idea) and who realise that the bizarre research on the "ideal nightmare" is a satire of the methods that the Dutch authorities have used to deal with problems surrounding the integration of *allochtones* in Dutch society.

An author can, of course, deliberately create confusion about the extent to which the authorial audience is expected to distance itself from the narrative audience. Hafid Bouazza, for instance, uses an exuberant metaphorical language of Eastern mysticism and erotica in his work. Because of the author's exotic name (that is to say, exotic in the context of Dutch literature in the nineties), it is tempting to view his work as the expression of an Eastern tradition – and Bouazza himself admits to playing with the suggestion of autobiography. In the end, however, Bouazza addresses an authorial audience that recognises the stereotypical images for the clichés that they are. His ironic use of stereotypes is made possible by what Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson have called the "use-mention distinction": although the clichés are mentioned in his work, this does not mean that Bouazza actually uses them – that is to say, that he claims them as

12 "Uit onderzoek blijkt dat 87% van de conversaties waaraan een gemiddelde allochtoon tijdens zijn leven deelneemt op misverstanden berust (de resterende 13% gaat over voetbal)". Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999): 58.

his own.[13] At the same time, we cannot conclude that an author negates the stereotypes that he or she "mentions" but does not "use". In Baycılı's *The Allochtone's Nightmare*, for instance, we read about a Turkish man who dreams about repatriating to Turkey, but then returns to the Netherlands because he can still claim a guilder deposit on a shopping cart:

> Je beseft meteen wat je eigenlijk aan het doen bent en wat er in Nederland van je geworden is. In Nederland ben je alles kwijtgeraakt wat je maakte tot wie je was. De schat van je voorouders. De vaderlandse waarden en normen die je tot een trots mens maakten, die van generatie op generatie doorgegeven waren […]. Je weet niet meer wie je bent. Zo gierig dat je je vaderland verlaat voor een gulden.[14]
>
> You soon realise what it is you are doing and what has become of you in the Netherlands. You've lost everything that made you what you were. Your ancestor's treasure. The national norms and values that made you proud, that have been passed on from generation to generation […]. You no longer know who you are. You've become miserly to the extent that you would leave your fatherland for a guilder.

The effect is one of a series of Chinese boxes: a stereotypical Dutch research report describes the nightmare of a stereotypical nationalist Turkish man (proud of a generations old tradition) who changes into a stereotypical miserly Dutch man. This 'clash of stereotypes' leads to a new stereotype: the migrant suffering from an identity crisis and no longer knowing who he is. This is not to say that those stereotypes are negated; Baycılı is not claiming that the Turkish are not nationalistic or that the Dutch are not miserly, or that migrants do not suffer from identity crises. The absurdity of the whole situation and the exaggerated phrasing such as "Your ancestor's treasure" do, however, create what Sperber and Wilson call an "ironic tone of voice". This ironic tone of voice embeds the stereotypes in a certain ambiguity and leaves it to the reader to decide whether or not the stereotypes and the failed integration for which they stand are valid.

3. The author: *posture*

To solve the ambiguity discussed above, many readers will search for an authorial intention. They may search within the text itself: as shown in the last paragraph, a reader can interpret elements from a text as traces of an author's ethos and construct what Wayne C. Booth has called an "implied author" by using rhetorical clues found in the text.[15] However, many readers – I would say most, with the exception of certain literary scholars – will use additional information

13 Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, "Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction" (1981): 311.
14 Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999): 91.
15 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983 [1961]): 71-77.

about the author to neutralise the ambiguity of a text. Other texts that Baycılı has written and statements she has made in interviews may function as an important interpretative framework for *The Allochtone's Nightmare*.

Authors themselves will try to shape the reader's framework as well. When Baycılı published *The Markov-Chain* in 1998, for example, its cover claimed that it was a "literary debut with a philosophical slant".[16] Baycılı's debut contains almost no coherent narrative, its style is highly associative, and its narrator is a mentally ill philosopher locked away in an institution (influential critic Hans Warren called the book a "heavy, abstract, but most of all self-willed debut"[17]). In an interview that appeared at the same time in a prestigious cultural and current affairs magazine, the author stressed that her novel was full of modified Wittgenstein quotes. She talked extensively about her philosophy studies and presented herself as a brilliant but recalcitrant student who was asked in her first year to join a "post-graduate class" about Wittgenstein but was not allowed to join the professors on their afternoon walks: "the professors wanted to relax during their walks. If I were to join them, I would make the discussions too complex".[18] The characterisation on the book cover, Baycılı's comments in the interview and the 'weighty' style of *The Markov-Chain* all serve the same rhetorical function: they present the author as being a difficult, intellectual, and self-willed writer.

Sociologist of literature Jérôme Meizoz regards such comments as part of what he calls *posture*[19]: the different discursive and non-discursive expressions of an author that are meant to clarify what kind of author we are dealing with. (These expressions may also stem from others, such as publishing houses, critics or interviewers, who are considered to play a mediating role).[20] Research on an author's *posture* is often part of the institutional study of literature, which examines the relationships between the way authors present themselves both within and outside their literary work and the institutions that are active both within and outside the literary field at a given time. The aim of this type of research is to reconstruct the positions available in a specific literary field and thereby explain the positioning of the different actors in that field.[21]

16 "Een filosofisch getint debuut". Sevtap Baycılı, De Markov-keten (1998).

17 Hans Warren, "Zwaar, abstract, maar bovenal eigenzinnig debuut" (1998).

18 "[D]e professoren wilden zich met die wandelingen ontspannen. Als ik meeging zou de discussie te zwaar worden". Cited in Rob Van Erkelens & Antoine Verbij, "Miss Wittgenstein" (1998).

19 Meizoz is following Pierre Bourdieu in using this term.

20 Jérôme Meizoz, "Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau" (2010): 83-86.

21 For a good critical overview of this kind of research, cf. Liesbeth Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation. The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, (forthcoming).

Since the present study is thematic, I will restrict my analyses to the role that the relationships between Dutch society and Islam have played in the *posture* of these authors. All of these authors have written op-eds linking this relationship to their own identity. They have given interviews and published essays in which they reflect on how their authorship and literary work has been influenced by those relationships. While a 'clash of civilisations' held society in its grip, they presented themselves as the voice of Islam in the Netherlands (Kader Abdolah), as a person willing to do whatever it takes to escape the coercion to choose between 'Dutch' and 'Islamic' (Abdelkader Benali), as a whistle-blower drawing attention to the threat of Islam (Hafid Bouazza) and as someone who sees his own, painful migration from countryside to city reflected in the troubles facing Muslim migrants today (Robert Anker). According to these authors, their work must be seen as an insight into the Muslim world (Kader Abdolah), an escape from the tensions in society (Abdelkader Benali), an unmasking of the notion that an author's background is relevant for a literary text (Hafid Bouazza) and a confronting representation of contemporary troubles that through a work's literary form will urge the reader to reflect (Robert Anker).

An author's *posture* not only serves to ensure that the message he or she wishes to convey comes across, but also, as ethical narattologist Liesbeth Korthals Altes puts it, to ensure "attention and authority: why should readers read this novel […] rather than do some compulsive apple pie baking or enjoy the company of their loved ones".[22] Baycılı provides a good example of this when she claims that we have no real knowledge of contemporary multicultural society in the Netherlands: "What we have, instead of human beings and their human stories, are statistics, numbers". She proceeds to describe the example of a mother realising she has lost "50 per cent of her children" with a mother who has not lost any children, but is very capable of acting as one. Baycılı claims that the latter will teach us much more about "the tragedy of a mother losing her child" than the first.[23] She is telling her reader here why an author would prefer writing fiction rather than research reports, or even op-eds – and why a reader should prefer reading literature over other text types. Fiction is assigned an important social function and Baycılı's op-ed can be read as a recommendation of

22 Ibidem.

23 "Wat we hebben, in plaats van mensen en hun menselijke verhalen, hun gevoelens, zijn de statistieken, de cijfers. […] Want in een drama maakt het helemaal niet uit dat bijvoorbeeld een moeder een kind verliest of twee kinderen, of dat ze 50 procent van haar kinderen verliest. Sterker nog, zelfs zonder een dood kind kan ze zulke gevoelens hebben, dat je in haar rol 'het drama van een moeder die haar kind verloren heeft' herkent." Sevtap Baycılı, *Donderpreken. Aforismen over Nederland* (2006): 48.

literature – or at least fiction – in general and of her own literary work in particular, which tell "human stories".

This notion, that literature can achieve something that other texts cannot, is a recurrent theme in contributions made to literary and public debates by authors writing about the relationships between Islam and Dutch society. Each of the authors discussed in this study conclude in their own way that something is wrong with those relationships and then proceed to claim that this can be corrected in literature – especially their own literary works. Kader Abdolah, for instance, states that the Dutch lack knowledge about 'the East' and Eastern thinking, and proceeds to present himself and his work as providing insight into the Eastern world. The other authors are less explicit. Abdelkader Benali has written op-eds explaining that the biggest problem in the Netherlands is that people are forced to take a position: you either have to be 'Muslim' or 'Dutch'. At the same time, he claims in interviews and essays that the beauty of literature is that the author need not take a position. Hafid Bouazza notes a lack of imagination in society, which he says results in an inability to look beyond mutual stereotypes, but he celebrates literature as an expression of the power of that imagination. Abdolah's statements reflect a certain classic *posture* of the engaged author, characterised, as Liesbeth Korthals Altes phrases it, by a "*pervasive ethicization*, which extends to a writer's literary work the moral norms considered to hold in everyday life, such as: adhesion to, and responsibility for one's words, or the direct bearing of one's conduct in real life to the value of one's work". Benali and especially Bouazza adopt a *posture* that is no less classic, namely that of a "*pervasive aestheticizing*: the extension, to the public and private sphere, of norms prevailing in the autonomous aesthetic domain, such as ambiguity, or impunity of transgression and provocation".[24]

Thus, the authors' contributions to public and literary debates create a social and literary context for their literary work. That work and those contexts influence each other to a great extent. Take for instance the following comment in an op-ed by Baycılı: "If only I had been clever. I could have been a famous festival writer of Turkish descent, instead of a poor, lonely writer". The remark is, of course, ironic and aims to ridicule those 'clever' writers who use their ethnic descent to tell "juicy stories full of tragedy, violence and bloodshed" about honour killings and other such stereotypical issues. In contrast, Baycılı presents herself as an honest person who does not make up clichéd stories when an editor of

24 Liesbeth Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation. The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, (forthcoming).

a famous talk show calls her so that she can appear on television.[25] This offers the reader of *The Allochtone's Nightmare* a reading strategy for the many clichéd stories told in the book. The *allochtones* featured in the report by the Dutch civil servant dream about flying donkeys called Aladdin, about being out of work, about not speaking Dutch adequately, about being shocked by nudist beaches, or being mashed into a traditional Dutch stew by a giant archetypical Dutch woman in national dress – but the true nightmare is ending up as nothing more than one of these stereotypes in the eyes of 'the' Dutch. Baycılı's op-eds give this book an interpretative framework, but the book itself contains a text-internal poetic statement as well: not unlike the *allochtone's* nightmare of becoming just another cliché, the author herself would hate to sell herself as the stereotypical "festival writer of Turkish descent".

These texts, all written in different genres, can be read as an attempt at what has been called *self-fashioning*: the conscious styling of the way in which an identity is experienced and expressed.[26] This can result in a striking coherence between contributions to the public debate, an author's poetics and his or her literary work. Baycılı writes in one of her op-eds: "People often talk about what I am: a Turk, a Muslim or simply an *allochtone*. As a member of such a group, and through this group, people attribute certain qualities to me". [27] When interviewed about being placed on a poster promoting the 2001 Week of the Books, themed as "Writing between two cultures", together with twenty-one other "*allochtonous* writers"[28] Baycılı observed: "I'm only there because of my background. For reasons relating to my work, I've remained outside categories so far. This time I'm part of a group. No, it's not at all nice".[29] In other words, literary categorisation is showing the same flaws as society. Those dynamics, in which the *allochtone* loses his or her individuality to the stereotype of 'the' Turk or the category of "*allochtonous* writer", form the plot of the "Fifteenth Nightmare" about the impossibility of a drunk *allochtone*.

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25 "Was ik maar een beetje slim geweest. Dan kon ik nu in plaats van een arme, eenzame schrijfster, een bekende festivalschrijfster van Turkse afkomst zijn […]. En ik kon helaas geen sappig verhaal met veel drama, geweld en bloed verzinnen". Sevtap Baycılı, *Donderpreken. Aforismen over Nederland* (2006): 65.

26 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioing* (1980): 1.

27 "Men spreekt vaak over wát ik ben: een Turkse, een moslim of simpelweg een allochtoon. Als deel van zo'n groep, en via deze groep schrijft men me voortdurend eigenschappen toe". Sevtap Baycılı, *Donderpreken. Aforismen over Nederland* (2006): 48.

28 For more about the 2011 Week of the Books, cf. the introduction to this study, p. 14.

29 "Ik sta daar enkel vanwege mijn afkomst. Om redenen die met mijn werk te maken hebben, was ik tot nu toe buiten alle categorieën gebleven. Dit keer maak ik deel uit van een groep. Nee, dat is absoluut niet leuk". Cited in Peter Henk Steenhuis, "'Ik sta op een lijst, alleen vanwege mijn afkomst'" (2001).

Similar dynamics can be discerned among authors like Hafid Bouazza and Abdelkader Benali, even though they frequently stress the autonomy of literature, that is, they stress that what matters in literature is the "purely literary" rather than moral or political issues.[30] Unlike Kader Abdolah, their societal or literary position is not explicitly discernible in their literary work. However, they their literary works depict some of the social dynamics they comment upon in op-eds, essays and interviews. Thus, Hafid Bouazza may conclude in his op-eds and poetical essays that 'Dutch' and 'Muslims' lock one other up in stereotypical images and remain "strangers to one other", but in his literary work, he plays an ironic game with those same stereotypes and creates love stories that are doomed to fail because the lovers are deformed in one other's eyes. And Abdelkader Benali may comment in his op-eds about the "coercion to choose" that has taken hold of the Netherlands and propagate that people should not draw such defined borders between categories like 'Islamic' and 'Dutch, but his literary works create a 'borderless hybrid' of different discourses, styles and languages and present characters who are continuously being forced to choose.

An author can, of course, play with his or her readers' expectations, such as those based on an author's descent. An interviewer visiting Baycılı at her home once commented, "You've hung the poster listing your name alongside the other *allochtones* who are the focus of the Week of the Books. It looks like you're proud of your position". Baycılı then corrected him: "That's irony".[31] In the following chapters, we will see that Hafid Bouazza and Abdelkader Benali tend to deliberately create a similar sense of ambiguity and tease reactions out of their readers by making similar ironic references to the importance of their background.

It is clear that an author's *posture* and the meaning this attributes to a literary work is a question of interpretation, as are the encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim characters that are embedded in fictional texts. Thus, my method will follow the logic of a hermeneutic circle: a *posture* is (re)constructed using different texts – some of which are congruent and others (deliberately) contradictory – and is then used to interpret how the representations of encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims in an author's literary work can generate certain meanings.

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30 Thus, they embrace what Gillis J. Dorleijn calls an autonomist conception of literature. Cf. Gillis J. Dorleijn, "Autonomy and heteronomy in the Dutch literary field around 1900" (2007): 126.

31 "Maar op een van de muren van je woonkamer heb je een poster van het CPNB geplakt, waarop alle namen staan van de allochtonen die in de boekenweek centraal staan. Kennelijk ben je ook trots op je positie, of niet? 'Dat is ironie [...]'. Cited in Peter Henk Steenhuis, "'Ik sta op een lijst, alleen vanwege mijn afkomst'" (2001).

4. Dialogicity and the circulation of social energy

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, a text always contains echoes of other texts whether or not an author has provided interpretations of his or her own work in other texts, and whether or not the reader is aware of (and accepts) these interpretations:

> [A]ny concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or on the contrary, by the 'light' of alien words that have already been spoken about it.[32]

It is for this reason that Bakhtin calls words *heteroglossia*: the ways in which a word has been used before – the voice of another person – 'sticks' as it were to that word, making every utterance polyphonic. According to Bakhtin, all words are heteroglot, but as mentioned in the introduction to this study, the heteroglot is intensified when a word like *allochtone* is used in the Netherlands in 1999. Both the word itself and the concept it refers to, were (and still are) vehemently contested in ongoing discussions. The book's language and topics make these discussions an integral part of Baycılı's *The Allochtone's Nightmare*. The reading experience for a Dutch person reading this book in 1999 would undoubtedly have been determined by a whole series of associations. Associations with, for instance, the heated debate that was instigated by the publication of Pim Fortuyn's *Against the Islamisation of Dutch Society* (*Tegen de islamisering van de Nederlandse samenleving*, 1997) or research reports such as the annual *Minorities Report* (*Rapportage minderheden*) published by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Agency (SCP).[33] The use of the word *allochtone* alone, found for instance in the short "Fifteenth Nightmare", calls to memory a whole range of other texts.

Authors will often consciously use *signalling words* such as *allochtone* to invite their readers to make a link with public debates. The case studies show that this often happens in scabrous, ironic or satirical ways: Robert Anker has one of his characters keep her "*headscarf*" on during an explicit sex scene; in a short story by Hafid Bouazza a Dutch woman tells her Moroccan boyfriend that "adjusting to a new homeland" has to start, rather literally, from the bottom up

32 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986): 276.

33 The Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau (SCP) is a government research institute. Its mission is to advise Dutch national and local authorities. The *Minorities Report* was an annual report that the SCP published from the early nineties until 2005, when it was replaced by the *Integration Monitor* (*Monitor integratie*). These annual reports present research on the position of non-Western migrants and their children.

while forcing him to give her oral sex; and a Moroccan father calls anything Dutch "*unclean*" in Abdelkader Benal's theatre text by the same name. The authors do not use these words randomly. This phrasing creates a tension: on the one hand, the literary form ensures that a novel, short story or theatre text does not merely function as a contribution to the public debate, like an op-ed would and, on the other hand, the dynamics of that public debate and the vehement emotions that a signalling word like *allochtone* can stir up become a part of the literary work.

Stephen Greenblatt calls this the "circulation of social energy"[34]: a word such as *allochtone* circulates through a whole range of texts before it ends up in *The Allochtone's Nightmare*. The same applies to the concept that the word *allochtone* refers to and that, in other texts, may be denoted with words like 'alien', 'guest worker', or 'Muslim'. The social energy (i.e. the thing that makes a word significant and gives it certain connotations) the word has obtained in earlier contexts is internalised by the literary work.[35] Using words to represent reality is always a form of "recontextualisation", as it is called in critical discourse analysis: words and meanings that stem from elsewhere are placed in the context of other words and meanings.[36] A recontextualisation expresses a specific point of view: of how words and their meanings are valued in a text. *The Allochtone's Nightmare* places the notion of 'a government report on *allochtones*' in the context of a bizarre study on nightmares that leads to "the ideal nightmare" as a "practical solution for the issue of integration".[37] Thus, the book can be read as an ironic comment on the entire praxis of studies conducted on 'the' *allochtone* (the notion that there is such a thing as 'the' *allochtone* is continuously ridiculed in the book as well), or even a satire of the 'typical Dutch' conviction that society can be 'made'.

It is almost impossible to not read *The Allochtone's Nightmare* as a comment on other texts about *allochtones* – and vice versa. We can conclude from the way Baycılı has constructed her text and explicitly refers to the public debate on allochones that this was her intention. However, even if she had used a different approach, the heteroglot character of the words used would still ensure the novel is read as a comment on other texts about *allochtones*. The texts thus enter a dialogue, as Bakhtin calls it: a dialogue about the meaning of the word *allochtone* and the question whether it is the right word to convey the intended mean-

34 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988): 6-7.

35 Ibidem.

36 Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse* (2005): 139-141.

37 "[P]raktische oplossing voor de integratieproblematiek". Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999): 125.

ing.[38] This ongoing dialogue ensures that a text receives its meaning against the background of other texts:

> The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments […].[39]

As I wrote in the introduction, this study aims, among other things, to reconstruct this background. This too is performed according to a hermeneutic circle: a dialogue is reconstructed through the analysis of separate texts, and is then used to analyse each of those separate texts. This analysis intends "to address and explicate [a text's] characteristic practice of referring to the world", as Stephen Greenblatt phrases it.[40] In the case of this study, the analysis asks what the point of view is, as reconstructed from a text, on the (im)possibilities of contact between Muslims and non-Muslims and how this can be textually represented.

However, *The Allochtone's Nightmare* is more than just a contribution to this dialogue that presents its own particular point of view. That dialogue is also incorporated in the text with its many references (in the nightmares) to the supposedly failed integration and the repeated appearance of liberal politician Frits Bolkestein – a central figure in the public debate about Islam in the Netherlands at the time.[41] Bakhtin claims that this is characteristic of literature – specifically the novel.[42] All texts contain "dialogical overtones", but those are intensified in literature.[43] We will see this in my analyses of Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza and Robert Anker: time and again these authors ironically, satirically or agreeingly include different voices from the public debate in their work.

They create space for negotiation in the texts themselves by repeating and recontextualising the dialogues to which their literary texts belong. As Jürgen Pieters phrases it in his study on the theoretical sources of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism, "an act of 'mimesis' [literature] inevitably rests on an act of 'negotiation' which involves a certain degree of semiotic transformation that either confirms, subverts or elaborates upon the object's original meaning".[44] In *The Allochtone's Nightmare*, for instance, Baycılı creates a stereotype of the communication between the 'Dutch' and '*allochtones*', presents it as a night-

38 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986): 216.
39 Ibidim: 281.
40 Catherine Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (2001): 40.
41 Cf. the introduction, pp. 8-9.
42 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982): 298.
43 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986): 92.
44 Jürgen Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation* (2001): 35.

mare and part of a satire on government reports, and negotiates with her readers about a new or alternative relationship between the 'alien' and the 'Dutch'. This negotiation is often less explicit and more ambiguous than in other text types such as op-eds, for example. This difference can be seen among texts that Baycılı herself wrote in these different genres. One of her op-eds criticises the fact that the so-called "identity" of *allochtones* has been "scraped together by the Dutch with their 'research' and 'observation'".[45] She uses this same method to create an identity for 'the' *allochtone* in *The Allochtone's Nightmare* and exaggerates it *ad absurdum* in remarks made by the civil servant narrator like the following one:

> Een belangrijk aspect van de ideale nachtmerrie is het meisje met wie de allochtoon trouwt. Het huwelijk duurt niet lang. Onder invloed van de Nederlandse samenleving kiest ze eerst voor het feminisme. Daarna wordt ze ook nog lesbisch en trouwt ze met de vrouw die haar les gaf over emancipatie. Het belang van dit aspect van de ideale nachtmerrie is dat hij het in werkelijkheid nooit zal aandurven om een meisje uit zijn eigen dorp te huwen.
>
> Voor ons betekent dat minder allochtonen in ons land. En misschien zelfs ook minder feministes en lesbiennes.[46]
>
> An important aspect of the ideal nightmare is the girl whom the *allochtone* marries. The marriage does not last long. Influenced by Dutch society, she first chooses feminism. She then becomes lesbian and marries the woman who taught her about emancipation. This aspect of the ideal nightmare is important because it means that he will never dare marry a girl from his own village.
>
> For us this means fewer *allochtones* in our country and maybe even fewer feminists and lesbians.

Much is suggested in this extract about the relationships between Dutch and *allochtones* by the use of certain discourses (the officialese in which recommendations and the value of the "ideal nightmare" are phrased) and stereotypes ('the' *allochtone* wants a servile wife and feminism does not exist in the country of origin). Unlike Baycılı's op-ed, however, not much is made explicit.

As I wrote in the introduction, the reconstruction of the dialogue to which a text belongs depends on the knowledge and insight of the scholar responsible for the reconstruction. This also applies to the interpretation of the way in which a text confirms, subverts or elaborates on the social meaning of its object of representation. After all, the reconstruction and interpretation do not necessarily spring from these texts, but depend on the scholar's individual reading strate-

45 "[N]iks meer dan een lege identeit die door Nederlanders met 'onderzoek' en 'observatie' bij elkaar geraapt is". Sevtap Baycılı, *Donderpreken. Aforismen over Nederland* (2006): 148.

46 Sevtap Baycılı, *De nachtmerrie van de allochtoon* (1999): 139.

gies. This does not mean, however, that the results of a study are random, because a scholar can gather the knowledge and insight that a text can use to generate meaning in a certain context. Moreover, sound methods of analysis and argumentation carry reconstructions and interpretations beyond arbitrariness. The scholar should, however, be conscious of the fundamental ambiguity of the texts he or she studies, and should not be tempted by unequivocal conclusions, more so when dealing with ideologically charged dialogues. The study of these dialogues is itself a contribution to a dialogue about dialogues: it is a dialogue about the way in which dialogues function and the way in which they should be studied.

3. Kader Abdolah

> *[It is] utterly impossible […] for the European to look at the world with the same eyes as the Oriental. For a while, indeed, the European may fancy that he and the Oriental understand one another, but sooner or later a time comes when he is suddenly awakened from his dream, and finds himself in the presence of a mind which is as strange to him as would be the mind of an inhabitant of Saturn.*
>
> Archibald Henry Sayce

1. Islam and the West contrasted

In a 1995 interview, journalist Peter van Vlerken introduced Kader Abdolah as follows:

> His stories are saturated with homesickness and longing […]. When reading his collections of short stories, you get an image of Kader Abdolah (Iran, 1954) as a man bicycling over the dykes along the [Dutch river] IJssel, battling with the strong wind and pouring rain, but dreaming about the Persia of his youth.[1]

The author will have read these lines with approval. Van Vlerken's image is exactly the one that Abdolah himself has tried to fashion in his columns and interviews and that, indeed, emerges from his literary work as well: an author expressing in words a refugee's pain, stuck between 'East' and 'West', the Netherlands and Iran (which Abdolah invariably calls Persia), while uniting these two worlds in his person and in his work. The author claims to be a unique phenomenon: after all, he says, there are few who can bridge the deep gap between the West and the Muslim world.

Abdolah's *posture* (the term I used in Chapter 2 to describe this conscious fashioning of an authorial image) differs from that of the other authors in this study. While Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza and – to a lesser extent – Robert Anker attack and ridicule essentialist notions about 'the' Islam and 'the' West, Abdolah makes these the starting point of both his literary work and his contributions to the public and literary debate. The author presents himself as a representative of an unknown Oriental world and a mediator in the clash of civilisations. He uses the difference between 'East' and 'West' to create a tension in

1 "Zijn verhalen zijn doordrenkt van heimwee en verlangen […]. Wie zijn verhalenbundels leest, krijgt dit beeld van Kader Abdolah (Iran, 1954): een man die fietst over de dijken langs de IJssel, optornend tegen de harde wind en neerplenzende regen, maar die droomt van het Perzië van zijn jeugd". Peter van Vlerken, "Kader Abdolah, een Iraans schrijver in ballingschap" (1995).

his literary work that drives the plot, a tension that is solved in a utopian happy end in which the deep gap is bridged and the 'Islamic' and 'Western' can freely mix. This can be linked to an opinion that Abdolah states often and readily, namely that literature – *his* literature – has a duty to mediate between 'the Western' and 'the Muslim worlds'. As noted in the previous two chapters, Abdolah is the only author who explicitly states that he writes out of his sense of engagement with encounters between these worlds.

In this chapter I will first describe how Abdolah positions himself as an engaged author and then analyse his literary work. It will become clear that there is a certain ambiguity in Abdolah's contributions to literary and public debates. As a public intellectual, Abdolah claims he wants to be a bridge between 'East' and 'West'. At the same time, he continuously stresses that the gap between these two worlds is unbridgeable. These two claims need not necessarily exclude each other, however: presenting his culture of origin as being incomprehensible for his Dutch audience enables Abdolah to stress the need for someone like himself who *can* make this 'other world' comprehensible. Originally, this 'other world' in Abdolah's discourse is one of refugees and the 'Orient', but it increasingly becomes the Muslim world. Authenticity and authority (in the sense of having 'a right to speak') play an important role here: Abdolah positions himself as a witness. Because of his Iranian origins and his position as a refugee, Abdolah speaks "the truth", as he puts it.[2]

In his work, we find the same ambiguity. Time and again, Abdolah creates characters who consider 'Islam' and 'the West' to be incompatible. Moreover, in his descriptions of encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims, the author uses easily recognisable stereotypes: the deeply religious, veiled Muslim woman opposite two homosexual men making love with the curtains open; an atheist physicist's scientific theories about the origins of the world opposite his father's naïve Muslim religion; the freedom fighter who changes his religion for leftist ideals opposite the cruel tyrants of a religious regime; and a family elder's inspiring, spiritual faith opposite the stifling fundamentalism of the Iranian ayatollahs.

These encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim characters follow a recognisable patter for the contemporary Dutch reader, but are also at odds with Abdolah's comments claiming that his work bridges cultures. There are indeed moments in his writings where the gap between the Muslim world and the West are bridged, but these moments are rare and the question remains whether Abdolah manages to go beyond an uneasy juxtaposition – in both the form and style of his work and the relationships between his characters and the worlds they rep-

2 "Ik spreek de waarheid". Kader Abdolah, "Meneer Bolkestein, uw waarheid is leeg" (1998).

resent. Because the inevitability of the clash between the Islamic and non-Islamic is emphasised in his works, these moments seem more like utopian exceptions to the rule that is established in the work as a whole.

2. Short biography and publication overview

Kader Abdolah was born in 1954 in Arak (Iran) as Hossein Sadjadi Ghaemmaghami Farahani. In 1993 he arrived in the Netherlands as a refugee. He had used the pseudonym Kader Abdolah since his Persian debut in 1980, an illegally printed book about the fate of the Kurds in Iran.[3] This book was the result of a trip that Abdolah had made through Kurdish territories under orders of Fadaian, the underground leftist resistance group he was a member of. Ever since his youth, Abdolah had been involved in activities against the regime of the Shah and later that of ayatollah Khomeini. In the end, his involvement with the resistance forced him to flee. Via Turkey, he ended up in the Netherlands in 1988, where he was granted a house in Zwolle. A while later, his wife and daughter joined him and a second daughter was later born here in the Netherlands.

Abdolah debuted in Dutch with *The Eagles* (*De adelaars*, 1993). Although this collection of short stories was only reviewed once in the national press, the author managed to generate a lot of interest, not in the least because of his background and the fact he had managed, in less than five years, to write a book in Dutch.[4] Several long interviews with the author appeared in national newspapers

3 The cover of his debut and a biography published in 2001 mentioned that Abdolah had published two collections of stories. Kader Abdolah, *De adelaars* (1993); Kader Abdolah, *De koffer* (2001): 50. In later interviews, only one book is mentioned. This is not the only ambiguity in Abdolah's biography: the author has, for instance, claimed that he was the director of a packaging factory, but this is not mentioned in his 2001 biography. This lack of clarity might be related to what Abdolah said in a 1995 interview: "When asked to describe his flight from Iran, Abdolah hesitates. 'I don't want to say too much about it. I worked for an underground organisation that is still slightly active, you see […]". Paraphrased and cited in Peter van Vlerken, "Kader Abdolah, een Iraans schrijver in ballingschap" (1995). And elsewhere: "All this is being read in Iran, they're keeping an eye on me. My family has had enough to endure". Cited in Marjo van Soest, "De tere snaar van Kader Abdolah" (1998).

4 The extent to which Abdolah's work is edited remains unclear. Fact is, however, that it is not written in Persian and then translated into Dutch. If we accept the definition of a Dutch author being 'an author writing in the Dutch language', this means that Abdolah is a Dutch author. Turkey-born Halil Gür, the most well-known author of foreign descent publishing in the Netherlands before Kader Abdolah, would not be a Dutch author, since his books are translated from Turkish into Dutch. Such qualifications are, of course, always questionable: you could argue that Gür, living in the Netherlands and

and magazines. His second collection of short stories, *Of Girls and Partisans* (*De meisjes en de partizanen*, 1995), which appeared one and a half years later, was reviewed more extensively and very positively so. This collection received the 1995 Charlotte Köhler-stipendium, meant as an encouragement for the most promising young author of the day. In that same year, he commenced writing "Mirza", a weekly column in quality newspaper *de Volkskrant*. A (partly overlapping) selection of these columns was published in three well-received collections: *Mirza* (1998), *A Garden in the Sea* (*Een tuin in de zee*, 2001) and *Caravan* (*Karavaan*, 2003). The four novels Abdolah published during the ten years after his second collection of short stories received mainly positive reviews as well: *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles* (*De reis van de lege flessen*, 1997), *My Father's Notebook* (*Spijkerschrift*, 2000, English translation 2006[5]), *Portraits and an Old Dream* (*Portretten en een oude droom*, 2003) and *The House of the Mosque* (*Het huis van de moskee*, 2005, English translation 2010). Whenever critics were less positive, it was regarding Abdolah's style, sometimes deemed too simple, and his supposed inability to provide his readers with insight into the psychology of his characters – complaints that increased over the years. However, most of the critics in the national newspapers and magazines have judged the works he published between 1990 and 2005 to be worth reading and to be a successful combination of the Persian and Dutch literary traditions. Abdolah has been a favourite among the reading public as well. His books have sold well: *The House of the Mosque* and, to a lesser extent, *My Father's Notebook*, were bestsellers; *The Eagles* received the Gouden Ezelsoor, an annual prize for the bestselling debut; and his other literary works have been reprinted several times in large editions. Several of his novels have appeared in translation in English, Norwegian and German, among other languages. Beside his own work, Abdolah has written an adaptation of the classic Persian fables *Kalila-o Demna*, which was published in 2002, not by his regular publisher, De Geus, but by Bert Bakker.[6]

Abdolah has received several prestigious national Dutch literary and cultural prizes. In 2001, he received the E. du Perron prize, an annual cultural prize awarded to a person or body that has contributed to "the promotion of mutual understanding and good relations between the communities living in the Nether-

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writing for a Dutch publishing house, is a Dutch author as well (and it is telling that his stories are included in, for instance, Abdelkader Benali's anthology of *Dutch* children stories – cf. Abdelkader Benali, *De Nederlandse kinderliteratuur in 100 en enige verhalen* (2009)). However, in this study, a Dutch author is taken to be an author who uses Dutch as their language of expression.

5 The literal translation of the Dutch title, *Spijkerschrift*, would be Cuneiform Script.

6 Kader Abdolah, *Kelilé en Demné* (2002).

lands".[7] Four years earlier, in 2001, he had been awarded the ASN-ADO media prize, a prize aimed at promoting "mutual understanding" in a "multicultural society", for his columns in *de Volkskrant*.[8] He received the Mundial Award (1998) and a knighthood (Knight in the Order of the Dutch Lion, 2001) for similar reasons. These prizes can be seen as acknowledgments for the two complementing roles Abdolah has claimed to hope to fulfil since his debut in Dutch literature: that of a voice for a people or community within the Netherlands and that of a mediator between 'East' and 'West'.

3. Kader Abdolah as a cultural mediator

In 1998, Abdolah was praised by critic Jan Paul Bresser for his engagement. While "the pen [is] strictly private" for the average Dutch author, Abdolah chooses to be a "chronicler of our times" according to Bresser:

> Engagement, to be socially active, to have a social conscience, these are almost other-worldly echoes from long ago that must sound out of place in our national literature, which is, after all, such a comfortable nest. […] And the few who – close to everyday reality – aim to be chroniclers of our time, come from far and have names such as Kader Abdolah. […] His pen is his weapon, no matter how archaic that may sound in the ears of his fellow writers. [9]

Bresser implies here that Abdolah's engagement is linked to his origins. As we will see in this chapter, Abdolah himself does so as well. However, emphasising the interconnectedness of autobiography and literary oeuvre, that is to say, the authenticity of the literary story, is not unique to Abdolah or migrant authors in general. As I noted in the previous chapter, this positioning fits the classic *posture* of the engaged author, described by sociologist of literature Benoît Denis as follows:

> Engagement […] requires the maintenance of a strong relationship between author and work. That is, for a work to be a choice and an act indeed leads to the postulation of a convergence between the political subject and the writing subject, with the one testifying in favour of the other and vice versa".[10]

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7 http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/nl/over-tilburg-university/schools/geesteswetenschappen/dtc/duperronprijs/prijs/, visited on 4 February 2011.

8 http://www.slas-soest.nl/details10/kader.html, visited on 4 February 2011.

9 "Engagement, maatschappelijke betrokkenheid, sociale bewogenheid, het zijn bijna wereldvreemde echo's uit voorbije tijden die onwennig moeten klinken in het toch vooral behaaglijke nest van de vaderlandse literatuur. […] En de weinigen die – dicht op de alledaagse werkelijkheid – kroniekschrijver zijn van onze tijd, komen van ver en hebben namen als Kader Abdolah […]. Zijn pen is zijn wapen, hoe archaïsch dat in de oren van collega-schrijvers ook mag klinken". Jan Paul Bresser, "Privé-rumoer" (1998).

10 Benoît Denis, "Criticism and engagement in the Belle Époque" (2007): 34-35.

Abdolah seems to presuppose a similar necessity regarding the convergence of an author's social position and literary work. This can be discerned in the way in which the author keeps his engagement up to date, as it were, by presenting himself as a Muslim rather than a foreigner, as he did in the early years of his writing career. He is following the developments in the societal discourse in the Netherlands: as mentioned in the introduction, terms like 'guest worker' and 'alien' have been increasingly replaced with 'Muslim' in the public debate.[11]

Abdolah not only links his position as 'alien' to a certain social role; he claims he can give new impulses to Dutch literature because of his exotic origins. By doing this, he joins in a widespread discourse among literary criticism and cultural studies that presents the migrant artist as someone who possesses a unique perspective that enables him or her to facilitate new cultural developments.[12] According to British cultural scholar Homi K. Bhabha, an important representative of this discourse, a gap is created when two different cultures are confronted with each other. Bhabha calls this gap the "'in-between' space": "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."[13] According to Bhabha, literature and art made in this "'in-between' space" are good examples of "innovative sites of collaboration and contestation": they show how a rift between cultures can create the conditions for a "beyond", a location where it becomes possible to move beyond the possibilities and limitations of the separate cultures. As a result, "newness" is made possible.[14]

In "A reconstruction of the debate on migrant literature in the Netherlands", Dutch literary critics Marnel Breure and Liesbeth Brouwer draw the conclusion that such "beyond" literature has not been rated at its true value. Breure and Brouwer claim that the Dutch literary field is dominated by a "modernist literary

11 Cf. the introduction to this study, p. 7.

12 Idem, p. 12-14.

13 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994), p. 1-2.

14 Ibidem. In Bhabha's work – which sometimes lacks clarity – the terms 'in-between space' and 'beyond' seem to be used interchangeably. I would like to propose the following distinction: the 'beyond' is a potentiality in the 'in-between space' that can be realised to a greater or lesser extent. A Muslim migrant wearing a chador may be seen as an attempt to suppress this potentiality, while a contemporary European playwright staging hybrid cultural forms may be viewed as trying to make maximum use of it. However, both can be located in the in-between space of migration and multiculturalism. Cf. the next chapter, where I will present Abdelkader Benali's work as an attempt to reach a fruitful "beyond" from a fruitless and barren "'in-between' space".

discourse [in which] descent and identity are no relevant critical categories". As a result, authors have been hesitant to distinguish themselves on account of their ethnic, sexual, social, or any other type of background. This would explain why "writers with an allochtonous background" have resisted so vehemently the "designation of allochtonous writer".[15] Indeed, as I will discuss in the following chapters, Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza have reacted with dismay at attempts made by others to pigeonhole them according to their descent. Breure and Brouwer regret this situation, as it has blocked appreciation for the unique value of "migrant literature".[16]

Kader Abdolah is an exception to this – and the praise he has received, especially during the early part of his writing career, for linking his biography to his literary work suggests that the "modernist literary discourse" was not as omnipresent around the turn of the Millennium as Breure and Brouwer claim it was. Moreover, it is striking to note how well Abdolah's literary work fits Breure and Brouwer's description of the qualities found in migrant literature: a "tragic and exciting restlessness" and a "fetishising of the location of descent".[17] In other words, Abdolah's *posture* neatly fits the expectation of the added value attributed to "migrant writers" when he entered the literary field. In an interview from 1996, Abdolah formulates a poetics that strongly resembles Bhabha's strident claim about the newness that results from writing between cultures: "I'm aboard the ship of Dutch literature, but I don't have to become a Dutch writer. I use Dutch words to make *new* prose. Is it Persian literature? Is it Dutch literature? It doesn't matter, it's my literature".[18] According to Breure and Brouwer, Abdolah is breaking one of the rules of Dutch literature. Self-confidently, he claims to be 'different': his origins and his capacity to formulate these origins in Dutch supposedly make him and his work unique. As I will show in Section 3.1., he presents himself as a representative of the 'alien'. He thereby claims a special literary quality for his work, in which an old Persian literary tradition is mixed with

15 "[L]iterair-modernistisch discours [waarin] afkomst en identiteit geen relevante kritische categorie"; "schrijvers met een allochtoonse achtergrond"; "predikaat allochtoons schrijver". Marnel Breure & Liesbeth Brouwer, "Een reconstructie van het debat rond migrantenliteratuur in Nederland" (2004): 387.

16 "[M]igrantenliteratuur". Ibidem: 395.

17 "[T]ragische en opwindende rusteloosheid"; "fetisjering van de plaats van herkomst". Ibidem. The authors took their definition of the perspective of the migrant author from Salman Rushdie.

18 "Ik zit in het schip van de Nederlandse literatuur, maar ik hoef geen Nederlandse schrijver te worden. Ik gebruik Nederlandse woorden om *nieuw* proza te maken. Is het Perzische literatuur? Is het Nederlandse literatuur? Het maakt niet uit, het is mijn literatuur". Cited in Ingrid Hoogervorst, "Je hebt de sleutel van je oude huis meegenomen, maar hij zal nooit meer passen" (1996). Italics added.

Dutch literature. Moreover, his work is to be regarded as the "voice of [his] people in the Netherlands".[19] This literary positioning fits the role that Abdolah takes upon himself in the public debate, which I will discuss in Section 3.2.: that of a cultural mediator whose descent enables him to provide the Dutch with an insight into the fundamentally different culture of the Orient.

3.1. Essentialism

As noted earlier, Abdolah presents the fundamental difference between the 'East' and 'West' as a fact. He regularly returns to this claim in his weekly newspaper column and in interviews by using old, Orientalist stereotypes: 'West' is rational, straight to the point; 'East' is irrational. In a discourse that strongly resembles the way in which the othering of the Oriental has taken place in the West for ages[20] – and in which Western thinking too is reduced to one single characteristic: rationality – Abdolah attempts make clear how important a person like him is: someone who can be a bridge between 'East' and 'West'. For instance, when Abdurrahman Wahid was elected president in Indonesia, Abdolah wrote that it may seem illogical to a "Western ratio" to vote for a "man who is almost blind and can barely walk as a result of two brain haemorrhages".[21] Abdolah then proceeds to explain to his readers how the Indonesians could be so irrational as to vote for a man who would not have much longer to live: "people in the East have a completely different attitude towards death. Especially a religious leader such as Wahid has an entirely different way of thinking than you […]. The philosophy of those in the Orient is circular. As round as the domes of their mosques".[22] Apparently, this illogical behaviour – expressed in everything they do, from voting to building temples – can be explained in terms of this circular philosophy. Although Abdolah does not provide any further details about this circular philosophy, he implies that it is contrary to a "Western ratio".

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19 "[J]ij bent de stem van je volk in Nederland". Geciteerd in Odile Heynders en Bert Paasman, '"De ziel van dit volk komt goed in gedichten naar voren, maar in proza niet"' (1999): 369.

20 In that sense, Abdolah's ideas can be said to be occidentalist as well as orientalist. Aspects of Occidentalism, such as representations of the West as individualist and rational, regularly appear in Abdolah's texts. Cf. *Occidentalism. Images of the West*: James G. Carrier, "Introduction" (1988): 5.

21 "Een bijna blinde man, die nauwelijks kan lopen als gevolg van twee hersenbloedingen"; "Westerse ratio". Kader Abdolah, *Een tuin in de zee* (2001): 147-148.

22 "Maar men heeft in het oosten een totaal andere houding tegenover de dood. Vooral een gelovige leider als Wahid denkt absoluut anders dan u. […] De filosofie van de oosterse mens is rond. Net zo rond als de koepels van hun moskeeën". Ibidem.

What Abdolah does in this column and other texts (where he often uses the same imagery for describing the 'Oriental way of thinking'), amounts to two things. First he tells his (Western) reader that there is a fundamental difference between East and West. His method for doing this bears striking resemblance to the essentialist, dialectic descriptions of the Orient of which Edward Said writes:

> [In Orientalism] the figures of speech associated with the Orient – its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness, and so forth – […] are all declarative and self-evident; the tense they employ is the timeless eternal; they convey an impression of repetition and strength; they are always symmetrical to, and yet diametrically inferior to, a European equivalent, which is sometimes specified, sometimes not. For all these functions it is frequently enough to use the simple copula *is*.[23]

Although the myth of the inferiority of the Orient is not a central issue in Abdolah's writing (but does not seem far off when he writes about an irrational people voting for a dying man), he does phrase the Orient in timeless eternals, presented as evident truths.

Second, he presents himself as a cultural mediator capable of explaining this incomprehensible, 'alien Orient' to the reader. This is the case in the previous quote and it is phrased even more explicitly in another column, in which Abdolah writes about his reasons for defending Islam, "the faith of the men and women in our house":

> Over the last fifteen years, Dutch society has changed much. Thousands of people have arrived from elsewhere, bringing with them their experiences, culture and history. It would be no more than decent to share those experiences with the Dutch.
>
> I admire the rational way of thinking, from A to B. I make use of this Western ratio. But I think in a circular manner as well, and this is based on the Oriental way of thinking.[24]

By presenting 'the Orient' in such a monolithic way (according to Said, an important characteristic of Orientalism), it becomes possible for Abdolah to function as a *pars pro toto*: listening to him and reading his work means learning about the entire Orient. This is the basic assumption behind the way in which Abdolah presents himself as an engaged author: in him, the 'alien' can find a voice of their own. He regularly calls himself a "witness" in the Netherlands for

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23 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1995): 72.

24 "In de afgelopen vijftien jaar is de Nederlandse samenleving sterk veranderd. Duizenden die ergens anders vandaan komen, hebben ervaringen, hun cultuur en hun geschiedenis meegenomen. Ik denk dat het fatsoenlijk is wanneer ze die ervaring met de Nederlanders delen. Ik bewonder de rationele manier van denken, rechtstreeks van A naar B. Ik maak gebruik van de westerse ratio. Maar ik denk ook rond en dat is gebaseerd op de oosterse manier van denken". Kader Abdolah, *Karavaan* (2003): 111-112.

his people, for refugees, for *allochtones* and for Muslims.[25] According to the author, this means his work opens up a new world for his Dutch readers. This is, as he phrases it with his typical pompousness and solemnity, a calling: "It is a duty for allochtonous intellectuals and the sons and daughters of the guest workers to take up their pen and let their parents' voices be heard".[26]

Beside this "duty" of an engaged authorship, Abdolah's origins are a source of literary quality as well. This is an important element in his *posture*. His descent ensures that his work can, as the author seems to suggest, compete with the greatest among contemporary Dutch authors:

> I dip my Dutch words and themes into my Persian thoughts. I give my Dutch texts the flavour, colour and scent of the old Persian literature. This makes Abdolah's literature different than, for instance, that of Harry Mulisch.[27]

Whenever Abdolah specifies how his Iranian origins influence his literary work, he often uses the same Orientalist stereotypes as when describing the differences between 'East' and 'West':

> There is a story in *Of Girls and Partisans* that shows a successful collaboration between the two languages. First the title "Then It Was Our Turn" is an example of the ancient narrative style used in the *Arabian Nights*. The reader immediately knows that a Persian something is being linked […]. I am someone who adds something, something more than words. […] These are all Dutch words and yet you taste something ancient in them. The rhythm is different…[28]

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25 "[G]etuige". Cf. for instance Kader Abdolah, "De lente" (2004) and the aforementioned interview with Peter van Vlerken, "Kader Abdolah, een Iraans schrijver in ballingschap" (1995).

26 "Het is de taak van allochtone intellectuelen en de zonen en dochters van de gastarbeiders om de pen op te pakken en de stem van hun ouders te laten horen". Kader Abdolah, *Een tuin in de zee* (2001): 117.

27 "Ik doop mijn Nederlandse woorden en thema's in mijn Perzische gedachten. Ik geef de smaak, kleur en geur van de oude Perzische literatuur aan mijn Hollandse teksten. Dat maakt de literatuur van Abdolah anders dan die van bijvoorbeeld Harry Mulisch". Cited in Odile Heynders & Bert Paasman, "'De ziel van dit volk komt goed in gedichten naar voren, maar in proza niet.'" (1999): 366. As is so often the case in interviews, Abdolah speaks about himself in the third person singular, which fits the solemn way in which he presents himself to his audience. Harry Mulisch is often considered to be the greatest of Dutch postwar authors, together with the other two members of what is called the Big Three: Harry Mulisch, W.F. Hermans and Gerard Reve.

28 "In *De meisjes en de partizanen* is er een verhaal dat een geslaagde samenwerking laat zien tussen de twee talen. Dat blijkt al uit de titel: 'Toen waren wij aan de beurt'. Dat is een oude manier van vertellen; het vertellen van Duizend-en-één-nacht. Je weet onmiddellijk dat er hier iets Perzisch mee verbonden wordt […]. Ik ben iemand die iets

The supposedly unchanging Orient – as though Abdolah, born in twentieth century Iran, stands in direct connection with a Medieval Arab text – and the inherently archaic and fairy tale-like character of anything Oriental are suggestions that authors such as Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza reject, but that Abdolah enthusiastically embraces.

The foregrounding of his 'alien' descent is the foundation under Abdolah's poetics and literary programme. Abdolah also views this as a social programme, as can be seen in a newspaper column published in 2001. Abdolah states that the presence of "displaced persons" in the Netherlands will give the country a magic quality: "Together we will make the Netherlands even more beautiful. And magical. As magical as Baghdad nights. And as mysterious as the songs that Afghan men hum for the women in Kabul. Now in Amsterdam too".[29] The cliché of the mysterious Orient that Abdolah uses here is at odds with the present-day realities in Kabul and Baghdad, but the parallel with Abdolah's work is clear: authors such as him enrich Dutch literature much like the magical and mysterious aliens will enrich Dutch society.

3.2. From black author to a son of the Koran

There is of course a difference between being a witness for a people, for refugees or for *allochtones* (the three different groups for whom Abdolah has claimed to serve as a mouthpiece throughout the years) and standing up for Islam. This difference lies not in the least in the fact that Islam has been the religion of the oppressor for many of these people in their country of origin, as Abdolah himself acknowledges. However, if we survey the period between Abdolah's debut and 2005, we see how Abdolah increasingly places himself in a Muslim context and starts to present himself as a spokesman for Islam.

Take for instance the way in which Abdolah describes the authors he says he feels related to. Again, in contrast with Hafid Bouazza and Abdelkader Benali, Abdolah has always claimed that there is a group of writers in the Netherlands who are related because of their allochtonous descent. For example, when commenting on the theme of the 2001 Book Week,[30] "writing between two cultures", he wrote about the unstoppable rise of "black authors such as Halil Gür,

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toevoegt, iets anders dan woorden. […] Het zijn allemaal Nederlandse woorden en toch proef je er iets ouds in. Het ritme is anders…" Ibidem: 366-377.

29 "[O]ntheemden"; "magisch"; "Samen gaan we Nederland nog mooier maken. En magisch. Zo magisch als de nachten van Bagdad. En geheimzinnig als de liedjes die de Afghaanse mannen in het donker stiekem voor de vrouwen neurieën in Kaboel. En nu ook in Amsterdam". Kader Abdolah, "Zeven keer" (2001).

30 For a description of this annual Dutch book festival, cf. the introduction, p. 14.

Astrid H. Roemer, Mustafa Stitou, Lulu Wang, Hafid Bouazza […] and tens of others".[31] While Abdolah seems here to designate all authors with a non-Western background with the term "black authors" – this enumeration includes authors with Turkish, Surinamese, Moroccan and Chinese origins – he later increasingly emphasises that a Muslim background is the common characteristic between the authors that belong to the same group as him. At the same time, Abdolah started saying that a "Muslim culture" was the source of the "magic" with which he claims to enrich Dutch literature rather than a "Persian literary tradition". An example can be found in a 2004 column that reads like an advertisement blurb for his own novels: "The Koran has given its sons and daughters to this country […]. Look at Dutch literature. Who has written the most beautiful Dutch books in the last two, three years? The writers who have been raised in a strict Muslim culture!" [32]

In another column, he provocatively compares the supposed surplus value of authors with a Muslim background for Dutch literature with Muslim terrorism like that of the Taliban and the attacks on the WTC towers:

> Thousands came to Europe and thousands are still on their way […]. They are all terrorists. Myself included.
>
> There is an essential difference. *We* are the ones who disapprove of violence and renounce weapons and death. […] And *we* take up our pens and let *our* characters march into the rural estate of Dutch literature with their veils and carpets. [33]

This column was written in response to the rise of Pim Fortuyn.[34] Abdolah turns Fortuyn's infamous warning against the Islamisation of Dutch society around here: he presents signs of Islam – veils and carpets – as an enrichment of Dutch literature. Abdolah ironically uses a negative Western stereotype of the Muslim

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31 "[D]onkere schrijvers als Halil Gür, Astrid H. Roemer, Mustafa Stitou, Lulu Wang, Hafid Bouazza […] en nog tientallen anderen". Kader Abdolah, *Een tuin in de zee* (2001): 14. Halil Gür, Astrid H. Roemer, Mustafa Stitou en Lulu Wang are of Turkish, Surinamese, Moroccan and Chinese descent, respectively.

32 "De koran heeft haar zonen en haar dochters aan dit land gegeven […]. Kijk naar de Nederlandse literatuur. Wie heeft de afgelopen twee, drie jaar de mooiste Nederlandse boeken geschreven? De schrijvers die in een strenge islamitische cultuur opgevoed zijn!" Kader Abdolah, "Mijn mooie koran" (2004).

33 "Duizenden kwamen naar Europa en duizenden zijn nog onderweg […]. Het zijn allemaal terroristen. Ik ook. Er is een wezenlijk verschil. *Wij* zijn degenen die het geweld afkeuren en afstand hebben genomen van de wapens en de dood. […] En *we* pakken de pen en laten *onze* personages met hun doekjes en tapijtjes het landgoed van de Nederlandse literatuur binnentreden". Kader Abdolah, *Karavaan* (2003): 138. Italics added.

34 For more information on Pim Fortuyn, see the introduction to this study, page 9.

Other: authors of Muslim descent ("we") are represented as a horde of Muslim terrorists, who 'attack' Dutch cultural heritage, as it were.

This shift from "black author" to 'son of the Koran' in Abdolah's literary positioning coincides with a change in appreciation for Islam in the op-eds and columns that Abdolah wrote in *de Volkskrant* throughout the years. In his first pieces, dating from 1996 and 1997, he presents himself as a mouthpiece for "all asylum seekers" and "all refugees".[35] Here, Islam is emphatically cast as the religion of the oppressive Iranian regime and the reason why refugees leave their country. Remarkably, Abdolah "uses" the same (Western) stereotype – Muslims as violent and fundamentalist – that he would later only ironically "mention", to use the terms of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson.[36] In these early op-eds, Abdolah presents Islam as a religion of "Arabs with the holy book in their left hand and the sword in their right", a religion that was alien to his country of origin but has now conquered Iran.[37] In later publications, Abdolah is milder, although he keeps stressing that he no longer practices the religion of his youth. He writes, for example: "Oh God, I should never forget such things. The things I grew up with […]. Here you are, the things of Mecca that have remained in my memory".[38] The phrasing suggests that Islam is disappearing from Abdolah's life.

The 9/11 attacks seemed to change that. Abdolah suddenly claimed to feel Muslim again:

> I was in France when I heard [of the attacks]. […] I was there with a number of French, Italian and Spanish writers and I suddenly realised I did not belong with those people. That I was different. That I had more in common with those terrorists than my colleagues.[39]

The dichotomy in this text is remarkable: on the one hand the West, with the "French, Italian and Spanish authors", on the other the Islam, with its "terrorist".

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35 "[A]lle asielzoekers"; "alle vluchtelingen". Kader Abdolah, "In Iran gaat het niet om steniging, maar om de angst" (1996).

36 See the previous chapter, p. 30.

37 "Arabieren met het heilige boek in hun linkerhand en een zwaard in hun rechter". Kader Abdolah, "Vrouwen achter de gordijnen!" (1997).

38 "O God, zulke dingen mag ik nooit vergeten. De dingen waar ik mee opgegroeid ben […]. Alsjeblieft, hier zijn de dingen die van Mekka in mijn geheugen overgebleven zijn". Kader Abdolah, *Een tuin in de zee* (2001): 26.

39 "Ik was in Frankrijk toen ik [van de aanslagen] hoorde. […] Ik zat daar met een aantal Franse, Italiaanse, en Spaanse schrijvers en ik merkte plotseling dat ik niet bij die mensen hoorde. Dat ik anders was. Dat ik meer met die terroristen gemeen had dan met die collega's". Kader Abdolah, "Altijd dit lege hart, altijd" (2002).

It is the division of "us" and "them" that is apparently so fundamental that even Abdolah himself, because of his Muslim background, cannot escape.

Again, he emphatically presents himself as a cultural mediator. He concludes, three weeks after the 9/11 attacks, that there is a social need for someone who can provide information about Muslims:

> [I notice] something […] happening in daily life. […] People want to know more. Who are they?
>
> Posing this question will bring more social harmony. Knowledge about Islam is limited in the West. […] More is required for Western minorities to integrate than just them learning about Dutch habits. Dutch people need to be willing to learn about the culture of the minorities as well.
>
> Islam starts with Mohammad. And with Khadija. Shall I tell more about these two?[40]

Here too, Abdolah implies that because of his origins, he is the obvious person to provide the Dutch with an insight into this 'alien' culture:

> I come from a traditional, religious Persian family […]. But the tendency in the Netherlands is: the Koran is a stupid book, Islam a backward culture. An answer to that was needed. I was confronted with myself, sent back to where I came from. […] The knowledge of Islam is limited in the West. I see it as an almost religious duty to lift the curtain.[41]

There is a striking contrast between texts like these, in which Abdolah lovingly speaks about "*My* beautiful Koran"[42] and the author who presented Islam as the alien religion of aggressive Arabs. Just as striking is the fact that someone who earlier claimed to have left Islam behind him, and would at most write about it with a certain nostalgia, now speaks about Islam in terms such as "religious du-

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40 "[Ik merk] dat er in het dagelijkse leven iets […] aan de hand is. […] Men wil meer weten. Wie zijn zij? Het stellen van deze vraag geeft meer harmonie aan de samenleving. Kennis over de islam is beperkt in het westen. […] Voor de integratie van minderheden moeten niet alleen zij de Nederlandse gewoonten leren kennen. Men moet ook wel met de cultuur van de minderheden kennis willen maken. De islam begint met Mohammad. Ook met Gadidje, zal ik iets over deze twee vertellen?" Kader Abdolah, "Gadidje" (2001). Khadija (which Abdolah transcribes as Gadidje in Dutch) was Mohammed's first wife.

41 "Ik kom uit een traditionele, gelovige Perzische familie […] Maar de tendens in Nederland is: de koran is een rotboek, de islam een achterlijke cultuur. Daar was een antwoord op nodig. Ik werd geconfronteerd met mezelf, teruggestuurd waar ik vandaan kwam […] De kennis in het Westen over de islam is beperkt. Ik zie het bijna als een religieuze plicht een gordijn op te lichten". Geciteerd in Lies Schut, "Dwingende roman Abdolah over de islam" (2005).

42 Kader Abdolah, "Mijn mooie Koran" (2004).

ty". This duty seems to go beyond merely providing information (for the Dutch), and even implies a defence (as a mouthpiece for Muslims?).

As was the case with the Orient in his earlier texts, the impression that Abdolah gives in these later texts is that he and his work can function as a *pars pro toto* for Islam. Again, he differs little between his columns, contributions to the public debate and literary work. Everything is deployed for his cultural mediation project. We read the following on the cover of his novel *The House of the Mosque*: "I have written this book for the Western world. It is about people, about art, about religion, about sex, about film, about the importance of radio and television. I have tried to lift the curtains and show Islam as a way of life".[43] Abdolah keeps reminding his readers that Islam is a religion of oppressors as well, with extremist excesses: "I want to provide insight into what is beautiful and what is evil", he says for instance in an interview about *The House of the Mosque*.[44] However, the aim of Abdolah's writing increasingly seems to be the rebuttal of supposed negative opinions about Islam in the Netherlands, as well as the confirmation of Abdolah's personal ties to Islam. Thus, his work is increasingly presented as part of an apologetic project, and together with the author's *posture*, is placed explicitly in a Muslim context.

4. Gaps and bridges in Abdolah's literary work

As noted earlier, Kader Abdolah's literary work presents the same paradox that we find in his contributions to public and literary debates. On the one hand, he suggests that the gap between 'East' and 'West' can be bridged. Abdolah's short stories and novels create this suggestion through their themes and literary form. Abdolah occasionally introduces places, subjects and characters that seem to represent a mixture of Muslim tradition and Western lifestyle. Moreover, Abdolah quotes extensively from Dutch and Persian literature and Muslim religious texts, which fits his claim that he wants his work to function as a bridge between cultures: the mixture of 'Eastern' and 'Western' literary traditions supposedly functions as the praxis of this bridge.

Abdolah introduces his 'common people' against this background: characters and narrators, presented as friendly and naïve, who lose their certainties in the confusing clash of civilisations. In simple, didactic stories, Abdolah seems to

43 "Ik heb dit boek voor de westerse wereld geschreven. Het gaat over mensen, over kunst, over religie, over seks, over film, over het belang van radio en televisie. Ik heb geprobeerd de gordijnen opzij te schuiven en de islam als levenswijze te laten zien". Kader Abdolah, *Het huis van de moskee* (2005).

44 "Ik wil inzicht geven in wat mooi is en wat slecht". Cited in Lies Schut, "Dwingende roman Abdolah over de islam" (2005).

want to show his readers the pain and confusion of these 'common folks'. As in his contributions to public and literary debates, the essentialist dialectics in Abdolah's literary work neatly conform to *idées reçues* about Islam and the West: the contradictions between these two worlds are reduced to simple dichotomies such as passive ('East') versus active ('West'), irrational versus rational and conservative versus progressive. Thus, the "perspective of the migrant or exile"[45] that many of Abdolah critics say he offers his readers is surprisingly similar to an old-fashioned Orientalist perspective – as was the case in his columns and op-eds.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss how Abdolah's literary work portrays the gap between 'East' and 'West'. In Section 4.1., I will analyse how Abdolah juxtaposes quotes from and references to Dutch, Persian and Muslim texts and by doing so suggests that his storytelling must be viewed as a performance of the merging of 'East' and 'West'. However, in Section 4.2 I will argue that in the synthetic sphere of meaning this supposed merging amounts to little more than a suggestive contrast of 'Eastern' and 'Western' literary traditions. A similar merging can be discerned in the other spheres of meaning: there are instances where the 'East' and 'West' and 'Muslim' and 'Western' merge, but these are arguably negated by the story as a whole.

In Abdolah's early work, encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims become a confrontation of orthodox, naïve, elderly Muslims and debauched Dutch, such as nudists and exhibitionist homosexuals. In between are the sons and daughters of these Muslims, refugees who – despite no longer feeling Muslim – feel forced to choose between the Muslim world and the West. From *My Father's Notebook* on, the main setting becomes Iran. Here, the encounters between the Islamic and non-Islamic have two forms. First, there is the contrast between young, atheist partisans and their parents, the same kind of naïve, elderly Muslims as the ones that appeared in earlier stories. This contrast mainly revolves around the introduction of new technology, such as radios and televisions, which are greeted enthusiastically by the younger generation, but rejected by their parents. Second, there is the much sharper division between those same young leftist intellectuals and the fundamentalist Muslims that support the regime of ayatollah Khomeini.

Thematically, all these relationships seem to represent a mutual exclusiveness: in the non-Muslim Netherlands there is no place for Islam and, vice versa, in Muslim Iran there is no place for non-Islamic elements. It is precisely these dynamics of exclusion and the essentialist way in which these worlds are repre-

45 "[H]et perspectief van de balling of emigrant". Xandra Schutte, ""Wie weg is, is weg" (1995).

sented that make the instances where the contradictions are transcended so special. Thus, we find a similar *posture* in his literary texts as in his columns, essays and interviews: the author and his work are presented as a unique merging of 'East' and 'West'. However, the gap between 'East' and 'West' is stressed to such an extent that it undermines the credibility of many of the endpoints in Abdolah's dialectic plots, in which this gap is bridged.

I will discuss several of Abdolah's short stories and novels, but will focus mainly on five specific texts. The short stories "The White Ships" ("De witte schepen") and "Fagrimoloek" are about Iranian parents on a short visit to the Netherlands. *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*, Abdolah's first novel, tells a similar story. The main plot revolves around a refugee, Bolfazl, for whom the integration into Dutch society is a troublesome and painful process, despite the helping hand of his depressed, homosexual neighbour René. An important subplot is the visit of Bolfazl's orthodox Muslim mother. Abdolah's second novel, *My Father's Notebook* is about the life and times of the deaf-mute Aga Akbar and his son Ishmael. The latter loses his religion because of his exposure to a leftist underground resistance in which he becomes active. Ultimately, he has to flee Iran after the Islamic revolution of 1979. The story in *The House of the Mosque* takes place at around the same time as *My Father's Notebook* and deals with a large family that lives in the eponymous house of the mosque. Throughout the years, the members of this family are divided into the three groups named above: the elder generation of orthodox Muslims, the fundamentalists and the leftist partisans.

4.1. Multicultural intertextuality

We have seen how Abdolah has repeatedly claimed to enrich Dutch literature with his "Eastern magic". His literary work depicts this magic – and the notion of authenticity that underlies it – by creating a more or less exotic context for his stories: his novels and short stories contain images of Medieval Persian texts and quotes from the Koran and Persian and Arab literature. The author combines these with quotes from and references to classic Dutch literature to give the impression of a bridge between 'East' and 'West' in at least the literary form.

The reader of Abdolah's first novel, for instance, is confronted with two richly illuminated, calligraphed Persian texts.[46] The book offers no explanation or comment about the pages. Abdolah once said in an interview that the texts are the work of the famous Persian poet Hafez: "I wanted Hafez to be on the book-

46 Kader Abdolah, De reis van de lege flessen (1997): 6-7.

shelves of Dutch readers".[47] However, since hardly any of his Dutch readers will be able to read the Persian text, these pages do little more than exotisise Abdolah's novel: the reader cannot fail to notice that the novel must be the work of an author with access to a centuries old, foreign literary tradition. Note, by the way, how this example shows very well that the social energy that becomes a part of a literary text through recontextualisation is attributed by the reader (although he or she might be manipulated, of course, by an author). In any case, Hafez could be seen as a fitting choice: the changeability of our existence is an important theme in his work and he is the author of *The Conference of Birds*, an epic poem about a dangerous voyage towards self-realisation. However, the only thing the average Dutch reader will notice is the Arab alphabet in a frame of arabesques: signs of 'alienness' and 'the mysterious Orient'. Seen as such, these calligraphies fulfil the same function as the illustrations of mosques, men with turbans and belly dancers in harems that accompany the text in Abdolah's novella *The King* (*De koning*, 2002): they place the author in the exotic context of the 'Orient of fairy tales'.[48]

Just like *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*, Abdolah's second novel, *My Father's Notebook*, starts with a quote from an 'alien' text: a passage from the Koran. However, this time, the quote has been translated into Dutch – made less alien, one could say – and integrated into the main body of text.[49] More quotes from the Koran and Persian texts are found throughout the novel, but this time Abdolah does not limit himself to texts that are alien to his Dutch readers. Another chapter starts with: "All the birds had started making their nests, all except Aga Akbar. He had no mate. No wife".[50] This is an unmistakable reference to the first known literary work in the Dutch language, of which the only surviving lines read: "All birds have begun their nests, except for me and you, what are we waiting for?".[51] The second part of *My Father's Notebook* starts with a quote, taking up almost three pages, from Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*, a novel held by

47 "[I]k wilde dat Hafez in de boekenkasten van de Nederlandse lezers zou staan". Cited in Marc Guillet, "Ik vecht met mijn pen" (1997).

48 Kader Abdolah, *De koning* (2002). The illustrations are by Sjoerd van der Zee.

49 Kader Abdolah, *My Father's Notebook* (2007): 3. This is Susan Massotty's translation of Spijkerschrift (2000), published by Canongate Books, to which I will refer in this chapter.

50 Ibidem: 41.

51 "Hebban olla vogala nestas hagunnan hinase hic enda thu wat unbidan we nu". For a long time, this fragment of a song or poem, written around 1100, was held to be the oldest surviving example of a Dutch literary text. Many anthologies of Dutch literature start with this sentence. Nowadays, however, opinions differ on whether the Germanic language used here really is a variety of Dutch.

many to be the greatest literary work written in the Dutch language. Elsewhere in his text, Abdolah quotes more passages from the Koran and from literary texts by well-known Dutch authors J.C. Bloem and Frederik van Eeden. The main aim of these quotes seems to be to comment on the story. The quote from *Max Havelaar*, for instance, precedes the narrator's recount of how he received a package of notes in an illegible cuneiform script written by his father, which he subsequently sets out to decipher.[52] Abdolah quotes at length from the famous first chapter of Multatuli's masterpiece, which every Dutch student will have encountered during his or her secondary education. In this chapter, Droogstoppel, a hypocritical coffee tradesman and self-declared enemy of poetry, receives a package of notes from an old acquaintance, the upright Max Havelaar, a former civil servant of the colonial authorities in the Dutch East Indies. The notes tell the story of the latter's doomed attempt to fight the exploitation of the Javanese population under Dutch colonial rule.[53] Another example of quotes that comment on the main story in *My Father's Notebook* is the passage from the Koran that tells the story of a group of men who have to flee and who fall asleep in a cave, only to wake up hundreds of years later.[54] This quote is given when the narrator expresses the hope that his missing sister has survived a snowstorm in the Iranian mountains while attempting to flee the country.

However, the quotes do not always seem to fit the context of the story. Abdolah, for instance, quotes the entire poem "In Memoriam" by the famous Dutch poet J.C. Bloem (1887-1966) and lets Ishmael, the narrator in most of *My Father's Notebook*, comment: "I've included this poem in my book because of my father's unexpressed longings. [A friend] told me that J.C. Bloem was the poet of longing and that he'd once described himself as "divinely unfulfilled".[55] This remark seems a bit forced. The novel, which is described on the cover of the first Dutch edition as a story "about love, betrayal, death and religion in a fairytale-like and tumultuous Persia", does not seem to be about anything "divinely unfulfilled". The story about a deaf-mute man in an arranged marriage who seeks love and passion in affairs and has to witness his children being imprisoned and fleeing the country because of historical events he himself can barely grasp may be said to have a certain tragic quality. In any case, the naïve Aga Akbar, who is happy in the little grocery store his son has bought him and who practices his religion in an almost child-like manner, does not resemble the melancholic deceased of Bloem's poem, who revelled in autumn and darkness.

52 Ibidem: 97-99.

53 Cf. Multatuli, *Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* (1995).

54 Ibidem: 318-319. Cf. Koran, 18:9-26.

55 Ibidem: 152-153.

And when Abdolah, through the reference to *Max Havelaar*, compares the deaf-mute father's notebook to the famous bundle of scribbled pages that Droogstoppel receives at the beginning of Multatuli's well-known novel, this hardly seems to purvey any meaning to his story. After all, Ishmael's father, the author of the original notes in *My Father's Notebook*, is a rather passive figure who suffers patiently, while the notes in *Max Havelaar* are written by Max, a man who passionately wants to address injustice. And while Droogstoppel is meant as a caricature of Dutch hypocrisy, an untrustworthy narrator and is presented as highly unlikeable, the person who receives the notes in *My Father's Notebook*, Ishmael, is its moral hero. Moreover, by quoting large pieces of Persian, Arab and Dutch texts in italics (rather than weaving them through the narrative), Abdolah draws, so to speak, borders between them: each is contained within the little corner of his text that he allots to them. Thus, the intertextuality in *My Father's Notebook* leaves the reader with the impression that its author is first and foremost showing off about how well-read he is and trying to relate his work to the 'great authors' of Dutch literature.

The text referred to most in the *House of the Mosque* is the Koran, which creates a striking tension between the literary form and the story that is being told. The novel deals with the vehement confrontation between the Islamic and the non-Islamic, a conflict described by Abdolah with an abundance of quotes from the Koran. He starts and ends his text with lines from the Muslim sacred text: the first words in *The House of the Mosque* are "Alef Lam Mim", three letters that open the second sura of the Koran, among others; the last words are the so-called "Light Verse", a famous passage from the Koran.[56] It could be argued that by using Muslim heritage for a story that can be read as an attack (playful at first, but becoming increasingly vehement as the story progresses) on an excessively exclusivist practice of the Islam, Abdolah is suggesting that Islam is not necessarily an exclusivist religion at all. However, once again the passages that Abdolah quotes do not seem to have any clear function in the story other than to explicitly place it in a Muslim context.[57]

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56 Kader Abdolah, *The House of the Mosque* (2011): 431. "He is light./His light is like a niche with a lantern./The glass is like a shining star,/Lit by the oil of a blessed olive tree./Its oil is almost aglow./Light upon light!" The original lines in Dutch seem to be Abdolah's own translation. Kader Abdolah, *Het huis van de moskee* (2005): 410. Cf. Koran, 24:35. In her English translation, Susan Massotty notes she has translated the passages from the Koran that Abdolah quotes in his text by creating "a composite of several different English translations, including an online version translated by Yusef Ali".

57 Assuming, of course, that the reader realises these are passages from the Koran. The fact that not all readers will do so can be concluded from a review by well-known Dutch

In the interview cited earlier in this section, Abdolah claimed that he included a text by Hafez because he wanted to "bless [his] prose with the poetry of the master".[58] His narrator in *My Father's Notebook* makes a similar remark when he starts his narrative with a classic invocation:

> I'm writing my story in Dutch – the language of the Dutch classics and thus the following long-dead writers and poets: the anonymous author of the miracle play Mariken van Nieumeghen, Carel van Mander, Alfred Hegenscheidt, Willem van Hildegaersberch, Agathan Marius Courier, Dubekart, Antonie van der Woordt, Dirck Raphaëlsz Camphuysen, Caspar van Baerle, also known as Barlaeus, and, in more recent centuries, Louis Couperus and Eduard Douwes Dekker, also known as Multatuli […]. I start:[59]

It almost reads like an imploration for Abdolah to be allotted a place between these great names of Dutch literature. On the whole, the intertextuality in his work seems to have a similar function of initiation and imploration, even when the Dutch and Persian texts are more closely weaved into the narratives: their presence aims to 'consecrate' Abdolah as an author who is able to mix two literary worlds. The mixture itself, however, is not actually accomplished.

4.2. Mutual exclusion and utopian bookshelves

As noted earlier, 'East' and 'West' are first and foremost put in a confrontational relationship in the plots of Abdolah's stories. In the abovementioned novella *The King*, for example, we find a pattern that recurs in all Abdolah's stories in which encounters between these two worlds are depicted: 'Islam' and 'the West' exclude each other and their encounter leads to incomprehension, violence and sometimes death. The short, fairytale-like story is set in Persia, at the end of the nineteenth century and is based on historical events.[60] A Persian king, "one of the last traditional monarchs", is worried about "young men who have recently returned from abroad".[61] According to the king's conservative counsellor, these

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critic Max Pam. Pam quotes the last sentences of the novel (the Light Verse mentioned in the previous footnote) as an example of Abdolah's limited capacities as an author: "Light upon light. Blimey, this reads like Queen Beatrix's Christmas speech". Max Pam, "Rechter van God" (2005). The attentive reader, however, has read the acknowledgments at the end of the novel, and will know that it contains passages from the Koran.

58 "[I]k wilde mijn proza zegenen met de poëzie van de meester". Cited in Marc Guillet, "Ik vecht met mijn pen".

59 Kader Abdolah, *My Father's Notebook* (2006): 101. The translator has added "in more recent centuries" and "also known as Multatuli" to Abdolah's original text.

60 As the author himself explains in an afterword. Kader Abdolah, *De Koning* (2002): 17.

61 Ibidem: 5, 14.

men have "devilish thoughts". They want to create a Western style democracy, restrict the king's power, "keep the mosque separated from the state" and introduce freedom of expression.[62] Following his counsellor's advice, the king has the leader of these young men murdered.

In Section 4.2.2., I will discuss how the plots of Abdolah's stories that are set in Iran are strikingly similar to that of *The King*. Young men introduce foreign technologies and ideas in a conservative and traditional Muslim county. At first they are met with a mixture of aversion and fascination. In the end, however, when naïve fear and astonishment turn into aggression and violence, these clashes of cultures lead to the exile or execution of the young men: they have become a non-Muslim element in a strictly Muslim space and must therefore be expulsed. In novels like *My Father's Notebook* and *The House of the Mosque*, these two consecutive reactions to foreign influences are divided among two types of Muslims. The mixture of aversion and fascination is ascribed to amiable characters that belong to an elder generation of orthodox Muslims. They dislike modern inventions such as radios and televisions, but, like the wise fathers they are, they accept the choices their children make. The aggression comes from the fundamentalist ayatollahs. The confrontation between them and the young men is to a much higher extent an ideological battle.

In any case, Iran is a strictly Muslim space in Abdolah's literary work, where things from outside, whether that be technology or notions, are always at loggerheads with the dominant religion. That same tension can be found, in reversed form, in Abdolah's stories that are set in the Netherlands. As I will show in Section 4.2.1, there can be no place for the Islamic in the Western world. This lies not so much in the fact that the West is presented as a place where Islam is violently opposed – which it is not – but because it results from the characters being given an ideology in which Islam and the Netherlands exclude each other: it is inevitable for a person to make a choice. Thus, in line with Abdolah's claims that his work functions as a testimony and gives refugees a voice, his stories aim first and foremost at showing the pain and confusion resulting from the chaos of clashing cultures. A certain development can be discerned here in the role that the elder generation plays in Abdolah's stories. In the early stories, set in the Netherlands, they represent the religion and tradition from which the refugees will have to distance themselves in order to belong in the West. Abdolah uses the trope of parents visiting their children living in exile in the Netherlands to throw into relief the definite – and painful – character of the choice made by refugees to move from the Muslim country of origin to the West. In later stories, these friendly Muslims function mainly as a contrast for the violent fundamen-

62 Ibidem: 14.

talists. In Section 4.2.3., I will discuss how the moments in which the gap between 'East' and 'West' is bridged can be interpreted in the context of Abdolah's literary project to act as a witness.

4.2.1. The Islamic in the Netherlands

In "Fagrimoloek", published in Abdolah's second collection of short stories, a mother named Fagrimoloek visits her exiled daughter in the Netherlands. When she returns to Iran, she tells her friend: "It is completely different over there, Zinat. People live differently, eat differently. To grow old is different. To die is different. Young women live differently and the sun rises differently and sets somewhere else".[63] These lines can be read as a summary of the way in which Kader Abdolah juxtaposes the West and the Muslim world, the Netherlands and Iran, and 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' in his stories: the free, loose West where everything is permitted, but where there is also chaos, as opposed to clear-cut Iran, where everything is governed by religious commandments.

Through this opposition, Abdolah raises the question about where the refugees, who narrate most of his stories, stand in relation to their new country. The fact that those narrators have much in common with what we know of their author – they are refugees from Iran, were part of leftist underground resistance movements, take long walks along the Dutch river IJssel – offers the readers an interpretative frame that strengthens the notion that these are stories narrated by a witness. Dutch critic Janet Luis has called Abdolah's homodiegetic narrators "strong-willed first-person narrators" and links this characteristic of his literary texts to the fact that the "first word" that Abdolah published in Dutch was "I".[64] According to Luis, this is fitting for an oeuvre that is mostly narrated by someone who "wants to give a testimony".[65] In between the Persian and Dutch cultures, this "'first-person narrator' is left to his own devices, has nothing left but his own testimony".[66] This emphatically present narrative voice makes Abdolah's work strongly diegetic. This can also be linked to the author's wish to convey a clear message – a testimony for his people, an insight into the Muslim world for the Dutch – which prevents an all too polyphonous use of language.

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63 "Daar is het totaal anders, Zinat. Men woont daar anders, eet anders. Oud worden is anders. Sterven gaat anders. Jonge vrouwen leven anders en de zon komt anders op en gaat ergens anders onder". Kader Abdolah, *De meisjes en de partizanen* (1995): 103. Mijn cursivering.

64 "Het eerste Nederlandse woord dat Kader Abdolah aan de openbaarheid prijsgaf [...] was het woord 'ik'. Janet Luis, "De wilskrachtige ik-figuren van Kader Abdolah" (2001): 21.

65 [H]ij wil ergens van getuigen". Ibidem.

66 "[De] "ik-figuur' [is] op zichzelf aangewezen, heeft alleen zijn eigen getuigenis". Ibidem.

This lack of polyphony is one of the reasons why the gap between 'East' and 'West' becomes so definite in Abdolah's work. The main aim of Abdolah's literary 'testimonies' is to make the reader aware of the struggle of those who have ended up in between cultures, and to accomplish this, the author emphatically foregrounds the differences between those cultures. Islam and expressions of Islam play an important role here. For example, in the short story "Red Wine" ("Rode wijn"), the Islamic prohibition on alcohol is used to stress the contrast between the Netherlands and the country of origin. When the story describes a visit to a pub, the narrator remarks: "It is illegal to drink in our country. Over there, you are considered dirty if you drink and people will avoid a person who drinks".[67] The phrasing is significant. "Over there" is not an alien place; it is "our country": thus, the narrator is not at home in the 'here and now' of the story. He is still an alien being free to do what is "considered dirty" in his culture of origin – and, one could argue, by himself as well. This is characteristic of many of Abdolah's narrators: they take part in a new culture, a 'here and now' that they try to embrace. They are no longer Muslim, but constantly remind themselves – and the reader – of how it was "[o]ver there", of the customs and habits of "our country", with its Muslim prohibitions. And it is these memories that prevent them from feeling completely 'at home' in the Netherlands.

At the same time, these stories seem to state that those who live in the Netherlands cannot realistically remain true to their Muslim culture of origin. In another story, we read about a refugee who is no longer able to "honour the tradition of [his] fatherland". Abdolah weaves this sentiment into a narrative about a longing for the homeland that is so strong that the imaginative accusations of the narrator's mother become real:

> Mijn moeder duikt in mijn geheugen op: Jij zou er moeten zijn. Jij! Je zou je vader met je eigen handen moeten begraven. Je zou het doek opzij moeten schuiven en het gezicht van je vader vrij moeten maken. Jij zou, als oudste zoon, een kus op zijn voorhoofd moeten drukken, maar…
>
> My mother pops up in my memory: You should be here. You! You should be burying your father with your own hands. You should take away the cloth and uncover your father's face. As the eldest son, you should press a kiss onto his forehead, but…[68]

The story deals with the remorse of the first-person narrator when he realises that: "A person who crosses borders cannot uphold traditions".[69] The formula-

67 "Bij ons is het verboden alcohol te drinken. Daar ben je vies als je drinkt en iedereen blijft bij je uit de buurt". Kader Abdolah, *De adelaars* (1993): 65-66. Mijn cursivering.

68 Kader Abdolah, *De meisjes en de partizanen* (1995): 50.

69 "Wie de grenzen overschrijdt, kan de gewoontes niet meer in stand houden". Ibidem.

tion is ambiguous, even more so in the Dutch original, since the phrase used ("Wie grenzen overschrijdt") can also be translated as "A person who steps across lines": the exile to the Netherlands has, of course, been a crossing of physical borders, but there is also the notion of transgression. Thus, his exile has placed the narrator outside the "traditions" of his culture of origin not only because he is out of place, but perhaps also as a sanction for his movement to a non-Muslim space.

Thus, this movement is presented as a definitive choice: a person who makes this move ends up on 'the other side', is forced to leave the "traditions" behind for good. Since the division between the two worlds is fundamental, the exile who wishes to settle in the Netherlands will have to renounce Islam. Those who do not do so risk losing their place in Dutch society. This clearly shows the heavy burden carried by those who find themselves in between 'East' and 'West'. In the confusion that results from the clash of cultures, they are forced to make a clear choice. In the ever-present opposition between Islamic and Western, the parents who visit their exiled children in several of Abdolah's early stories play the role of catalyst. Because of them, the refugee-narrator resolves to take a stand: he belongs to the West, instead of the Muslim past that his mother or father represents.

To facilitate this role, Abdolah gives these elderly, naïve Muslims an emphatically 'alien' character. This can be discerned in the very first description Abdolah gives of a Muslim in the Netherlands. In the story "The White Ships", the arrival of the narrator's father at the Dutch Schiphol airport is phrased as follows: "My father arrived with a rolled up carpet under his left arm […]. Suddenly […] I saw him appear. He looked at the *Western* world in surprise, but with restraint".[70] The Persian carpet (the suggestion that he had flown to the Netherlands on it − again, the Eastern magic − contrasts with the realist tone of the rest of the story) and his surprise stress the fact that the father is an alien element. Abdolah creates a stark contrast between this alien element and the "Western world". On the one side, we have the pious Muslim father who sits down to read in his Koran immediately after arriving at his son's house.[71] On the other hand, there is the Netherlands, which is presented equally emphatically as being 'loose':

> I showed him the quotidian aspects of Dutch life: children skating on frozen canals […]. A billboard outside the supermarket advertising a sex club with an image of

70 "Mijn vader arriveerde met een opgerold Perzisch tapijt onder zijn linkerarm […]. Ik zag hem opeens […] tevoorschijn komen. Hij keek verbaasd, maar beheerst naar de westerse wereld". Ibidem: 104. Italics added.

71 Ibidem: 105.

> two men making love. Women struggling to their cars with shopping carts filled to the brink with drinks, crisps, chocolates, beers and a women's magazine and boys wearing earrings, smoking, with a girl sitting between their thighs and the boys kissing the girl.[72]

Over the years, Abdolah's presentations of the contrast between the Muslim parent and the Western country of exile have become more and more stereotyped. Two years after "The White Ships", he published the abovementioned "Fagrimoloek" in his second collection of short stories. The mother in this story tells her friend in Iran about her visit to the beach in the Netherlands: "Over there, everyone was walking around naked and then there was me, with that veil… not really my thing".[73] And again two years later, in *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*, this stereotypical contrast between the conservative 'East' and the loose 'West' takes on slapstick-like proportions when presented as an encounter between the narrator's strictly Muslim mother and his exhibitionist homosexual neighbour. The latter helps the narrator by attaching a weathercock that once graced a church tower to his chimney. The cock points towards Mecca, so that his mother knows where to direct her prayers. In the end, however, it is precisely this weathercock that makes praying impossible after she sees the neighbour making love to his male partner in front of the open window:

> After seeing that, she refused to look at the cock. It troubled her greatly. "I can't pray in your house anymore, my boy. That cock jumps out of nowhere in the middle of my prayers."
>
> I couldn't do anything for her. Sometimes I took her to a Moroccan mosque. But it was of no use. "That cock keeps following me", she said.[74]

Underlying this ridiculous scene, with its heavy phallic symbolism (which becomes even more apparent in the English translation), there seems to be yet another Orientalist cliché: the Orient as feminine, impotent, passive, "waiting to be

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72 "[I]k liet hem de gewone dingen van het Nederlandse leven zien: kinderen die op bevroren grachten schaatsten […]. Een reclamebord van een seksclub met een afbeelding van twee mannen die vrijden, voor de supermarkt. Vrouwen die met moeite volle karretjes drank, nootjes, chips, chocolaatjes, biertjes en een Libelle van de supermarkt naar de auto's brachten en jongens met oorbelletjes die rookten en tussen de dijen een meisje hadden en dat meisje kusten". Ibidem: 114.

73 "Daar liep iedereen bloot rond en ik, met die sluier om… nee, dat was niets voor mij". Kader Abdolah, *De meisjes en de partizanen* (1995): 103.

74 "[T]oen ze die scène had gezien, wilde ze niet meer naar de haan kijken. Ze had er grote problemen mee. 'Jongen, ik kan niet meer bidden in je huis. Midden in mijn gebeden springt die haan ineens tevoorschijn.' Ik kon niets voor haar doen. Soms nam ik haar mee naar een Marokkaanse moskee. Maar het hielp niet. 'Die haan achtervolgt me steeds', zei ze". Kader Abdolah, *De reis van de lege flessen* (1997): 30.

ravished by the West".[75] This sexual tension between 'East' and 'West' can also be found in another passage, in which the narrator, Bolfazl, explains that he has lost his position as the head of the family in exile: his wife and son no longer obey him in this country where male power is not as self-evident as in his country of origin. Abdolah stresses this loss of male power with crude symbolism, such as a dildo throw against Bolfazl's window during a breakdown of communication between him and his wife. The encounter between the Western and the Islamic becomes a caricature in *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles* with the phallic symbol that haunts the old woman and the stereotypical representatives of the West and the Muslim world (on the one side a gay man who sunbathes naked and has sex with the curtains open, and on the other side a veiled, naïve woman with her religion of prohibitions).

We will encounter a similar overblown caricature of the contrasts between 'East' and 'West' in the works of Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza. In some of their short stories, novels and theatre plays, the encounters between 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' gain a decidedly burlesque or grotesque character through the use of hyperboles and literal metaphors. However, unlike Abdolah, Benali and Bouazza use these techniques to ridicule the notion that there is a fundamental difference between 'East' and 'West'. The slapstick in Abdolah's work, such as in the passage cited above, intends to give the story a tragicomic character. Thus, *The Voyage of the Empty bottles* has a more light-hearted tone than his earlier work. His early stories tend to become melodramas, such as "Fagrimoloek", where the despair of the mother is described as "the Netherlands [having] extinguished her last hope like a candle" when she discovers that her exiled daughter is divorced from the father of her child and has taken up drinking.[76] This melodrama is replaced with comedy in wry descriptions of the drudgeries that Bolfazl and his mother face. However, the function of the contradictions between 'East' and 'West', no matter how comically they are represented, remains to show the extent to which Bolfazl is torn between these two worlds. He is constantly presented as a melancholic "exile", who describes himself as a "witness, a witness wanting to experience exile until its bitter end".[77]

The orthodox Muslim parents represent a possible answer to the question whether there is a place in the Netherlands for a refugee from Iran. For them, the Dutch surroundings are hostile. The mother in *The Voyage of the Empty Bottle* is unable to pray and the mother in "Fagrimoloek" also experiences the Nether-

75 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1994): 311.

76 Kader Abdolah, *De meisjes en de partizanen* (1995): 103.

77 "Tegelijkertijd dacht ik dat ik een getuige was, een getuige die de vlucht tot het bittere eind wilde meemaken". Kader Abdolah, *De reis van de lege flessen* (1997): 52.

lands as a place where there is no room for her Muslim identity. This identity is represented by her veil, immediately recognisable as *pars pro toto* for Islam by Abdolah's readers:

> Ik moet je eigenlijk een paar verhalen over de harde wind in Nederland vertellen. De kracht van de wind en de regen daar moet je meemaken! […]. Op een avond toen ik met Maria over de dijk wandelde, kreeg de wind opeens vat op mijn sluier en wilde hem afpakken. Ik hield mijn sluier vast. De wind trok mij nu met sluier en al mee, hij rukte hem van mijn hoofd en nam hem mee naar de andere kant van de rivier.[78]
>
> I should tell you a few things about the strong winds in the Netherlands. The force of wind and rain over there is something you should experience! […] One evening, when I was strolling over the dyke with Maria, the wind suddenly grasped my veil and wanted to take it away from me. I held on to my veil. Now, the wind was tugging at both me and my veil and tore it from my head and took it to the other side of the river.

The mother's experience of the Dutch wind becomes an anthropomorphic symbol for the Netherlands: her veil is not just blown by the wind; it is the country of the Netherlands that wants to take it from her.

Abdolah's stories that have a refugee narrator are constructed in such a way that they read as a plea. The rhetoric of this plea is that since these refugees accept the Dutch looseness and freedom there is a place for them in Dutch society. After all, the sharp contrast between "the Western world" and the world of "Islam" in Abdolah's stories makes the possibility of their presence all but self-evident. This is stressed by the arrival of these parents who are clearly 'out of place' and who are unable to deal with the Dutch liberties because of their Muslim convictions. At the same time, they serve as 'proof' of the narrators' tolerance. The tension created by the doubt that that there may be a place for the narrator in the Netherlands is solved as he or she distances himself or herself from the father or mother and the Muslim religion they represent. The narrator of "The White Ships", for instance, literally creates a distance between himself and his father whenever the latter practices his religion: "[My father] pensively took the holy book from his inside pocket and sat down on the bed. I walked away and softly closed the door".[79] In *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*, Abdolah makes it even more explicit that the narrator and his mother are each on one side of a deep gap: "My mother was religious […] and perceived the changes in my live in a *completely different* way […]. My mother had left her familiar surroundings to come to the Netherlands, to *my place*, to visit me. *Everything* she

78 Ibidem: 114-115.

79 "Nadenkend haalde [mijn vader] het heilige boek uit zijn binnenzak en ging op het bed zitten. Ik liep weg en deed de deur zachtjes dicht". Kader Abdolah, *De adelaars* (1993): 105.

saw was against her religion and prohibited".[80] The "completely different" that stood between the West and the Muslim world in "Fagrimoloek" also stands between the son and his mother in *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*.

In *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*, the neighbour's homosexuality becomes a kind of test. The narrator is confronted with a dilemma: he has to choose between Islam that prohibits everything and the Netherlands where anything goes. The narrator has to 'learn', as it were, to accept homosexuality, which is unacceptable for his mother and his Muslim culture of origin. Just like his mother, Bolfazl at first finds it impossible to even "think of what was going on in [his neighbour] René's house".[81] When Bolfazl and his wife visit René for the first time, we read: "A large double bed immediately drew my attention. In fact, I knew why that bed was there. And yet, I didn't […]. Only when my mother visited me did it sink in".[82] Only when Bolfazl had to choose between the worlds that are represented by his mother and René did homosexuality become 'normal' for him: "To me, [the man the neighbour lived with] was René's partner, but to my mother he had become the symbol of the Netherlands".[83] There is a certain rhetoric in remarks like these by the narrator: by accepting his neighbour's homosexuality and exhibitionism, he has deserved his place in this, as he phrases it elsewhere, "half-naked society".[84]

The pathos of the work that Abdolah published during this early period of his authorship was taken seriously by his critics. They indeed read his stories as testimonies of the confusion and the suffering caused by the clash of cultures: "With few words, he sketches a pregnant image of the Iranian nightmare, the uncertain existence of an 'asylum seeker' and the longing for the red-brown lips of the beloved", Marner Breure, writes in a review of Abdolah's debut for the national newsmagazine *Vrij Nederland*.[85] Two years later Xandra Schutte writes about Abdolah's second collection of short stories in the cultural magazine *De*

80 Mijn moeder was gelovig […] en keek totaal anders naar de veranderingen in mijn leven […]. Mijn moeder was van haar vertrouwde omgeving, naar Nederland, bij mij op bezoek gekomen. Alles wat ze zag, was tegen haar geloof en strafbaar". Kader Abdolah, *De reis van de lege flessen* (1997): 20. Italics added.

81 "Ik wist dat ze zelfs niet zou kunnen denken aan wat er in Renés huis gebeurde". Ibidem.

82 "Een groot tweepersoonsbed onder het raam trok meteen mijn aandacht. Eigenlijk wist ik waarom dat bed daar stond. En ook weer niet […]. Pas toen mijn moeder bij mij op bezoek kwam zou het tot mij doordringen". Ibidem: 17.

83 "Voor mij was [de man met wie de buurman samenwoonde] de vriend van René, maar voor mijn moeder was hij het symbool van Holland geworden". Ibidem: 40.

84 "We waren […] in een halfnaakte samenleving gevallen". Ibidem: 18.

85 "Hij schetst met weinig woorden een veelzeggend beeld van de Iraanse nachtmerrie, het onzekere bestaan van de 'asielzoeker', en het heimwee naar de roodbruine lippen van de geliefde", Marnel Breure, "De schrijver als trekvogel" (1993).

Groene Amsterdammer: "The ambiguity of the exile is a highly uncomfortable situation for Abdolah. His characters are not only confronted with two different countries, the archaic country of their youth and the modern country where they have taken refuge, but with two different ways of life as well". Schutte explicitly mentions "Fagrimoloek" as a telling example of this.[86] And Yra van Dijk discusses *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles* in quality newspaper *de Volkskrant* as follows: "All aspects of the book contribute to its story about captivity and exile […]. This is a testimony".[87] However, to show that the refugee is torn, Abdolah uses heavily accentuated stereotypes. The repetition of the same themes and the stereotyped way in which a world of veils, where everything "happened behind curtains",[88] is contrasted with a world of open windows makes the inevitability of a clash of civilisations absolutely clear. This is apparently so recognisable for his critics that they see his work as a realist representation of the contradictions between the "two ways of life" in Iran and the Netherlands. In any case, they are in accordance with what the author himself has said in his op-eds and columns about the fundamental differences between 'East' and 'West' being an inescapable reality.

4.2.2. The non-Islamic in Iran

As noted, there is a pattern in the way the encounters between the Islamic and the non-Islamic take place in Abdolah's work. Although the encounters have a different form in the stories that are set in Iran, the pattern remains the same: the first encounter leads to a mixture of repulse and interest on the part of the Muslims, after which the confrontation becomes more vehement and one of the two has to step aside. As we have seen, it is the Islamic who must step aside in the Netherlands. Not unexpectedly, it is the non-Islamic in Iran. The way in which this pattern is developed in the stories that are set in Iran – most of all in the novels *My Father's Notebook* and *The House of the Mosque* – is quite programmed, even more so than in Abdolah's other work. In *My Father's Notebook*, the narrator's naïve, deaf-mute father with his simple faith is emphatically

86"De tweeslachtigheid van de balling is voor Abdolah een hoogst ongemakkelijke toestand. Zijn personages worden niet alleen geconfronteerd met twee verschillende landen, het archaïsche land van hun jeugd en het moderne land waartoe ze hun toevlucht hebben gezocht, maar ook met twee manieren van leven". Xandra Schutte, "Wie weg is, is weg" (1995).

87 "Alles staat in dienst van het verhaal over gevangenschap en vlucht […]. Dit is een getuigschrift". Yra van Dijk, "Alle hoeken van de vlucht. Kader Abdolah roept steeds zijn verleden op" (1997).

88 "We [kwamen] uit een cultuur waarin alles achter gordijnen gebeurde". Kader Abdolah, *De reis van de lege flessen* (1997): 18.

made to represent the Iranian people as a whole. The narrator himself is a member of a communist party who wants only the best for this people, but has to watch how it is "bewitched" by Khomeini and his accomplices without being able to do anything against it. In *The House of the Mosque*, the same types of simplistic characters returns: the wise family elder who resignedly accepts that the sons of the house each go their own way and who thus represents the humane Islam of an elder generation, the intelligent and heroic communist guerrillas who represent the non-Islamic, and of course the scary fundamentalist, a role played by Khomeini supporter Khalkhal. Thus, as in Abdolah's op-eds and columns, the Muslims in his literary work can be divided in two types: the fundamentalists, "with the holy book in the left hand and a sword in the right" and the friendly, naïve orthodox Muslims, outdated but wise.

Abdolah's works that are set in Iran present the orthodox Muslims in the same way as in those set in the Netherlands: docile and passive. Here, as well, Abdolah expresses himself in stereotypes and stresses naivety (in *My Father's Notebook* extended to the entire Iranian people) and religious prohibitions. In an Orientalist manner, the timeless world that these characters represent is confronted with the dynamics and looseness that stem from the West. An example can be found in the short story *Of Girls and Partisans* (*De meisjes en de partizanen*), where a narrator remembers the tension between his own fascination with modernity and the orthodoxy of his strictly religious family. The father is constantly described as praying "towards Mecca" or "reading in the holy book".[89] This religiosity is confronted with a radio that the narrator secretly buys and that brings about an encounter with "girls and women from other countries singing songs".[90] Islam here is first and foremost a religion of prohibitions. This is given extreme proportions. The father in the story, for example, would have "immediately rinsed […] his hands" if he "were to accidently touch a radio".[91] This contradiction between modern technology and a strict religious elder generation that wants nothing to do with it returns regularly in Abdolah's work. In the short story "The Radio" ("De radio"), a son convinces his father, an imam, to use a recorder to practise his sermons – although the father only dares to touch it when wearing gloves.[92] In *The House of the Mosque* a nephew convinces his uncle – also an imam – to secretly watch Neil Armstrong landing on the

89 "Hij stond midden in de woonkamer richting Mekka te bidden"; "Mijn vader […] las in het heilige boek". Kader Abdolah, *De meisjes en de partizanen* (1995): 55-60.

90 "[D]e meisjes en de vrouwen uit andere landen die liedjes zongen". Ibidem: 57.

91 "Als mijn vader per ongeluk een radio zou aanraken, zou hij meteen zijn hand afspoelen". Ibidem: 55.

92 Kader Abdolah, "De radio" (2001): passim.

moon on television.[93] In the stories, these episodes function as a sort of dark foreboding of what is to come: all young men who secretly listen to the radio or convince the elder generation to use new technologies end up as exiles.

It becomes clear in these stories that once a person has chosen the non-Islamic, this choice is definite. Just as in the stories set in the Netherlands, the definiteness is further stressed when this choice results in the parents and their children drifting apart. In *My Father's Notebook*, for instance, the narrator loses his religion after reading some books given to him by "one of the most important theoreticians of the underground leftist guerrilla movement".[94] To the astonishment of his father, he stops taking part in the prayers at the mosque. When father and son discuss this matter, the leftist ideologue's books are placed in an antagonistic relation with the Koran – once one has read those books, one can no longer partake in prayers:

> Then [my father] suddenly made his move, a counterattack: 'The Holy Book comes from Heaven. It was written by the great Holy One who lives up above. So there must be a Holy One in Heaven.'
>
> I shook my head. 'The Koran doesn't come from Heaven. It's a book – a good book – but it has nothing to do with Heaven.'
>
> 'Yes it does. […] You yourself kissed the cover of the book and washed your hands before you read it.'
>
> 'You're right. I used to touch my forehead to the ground. Then I read these books and found out about other things, and they…[…]'[95]

Abdolah's characteristic style of short, simple sentences functions well in this description of the difficult communication with a deaf-mute person. It imitates, as it were, the simple sign language that Ishmael speaks with his father. This simplicity also results in a sharp and exclusivist contrast between faith and faithlessness. Either one reads the "Holy Book" and believes in "the Holy One in Heaven", or one reads "those books" and can no longer pray. Moreover, the words "move" and "counterattack" suggest a struggle between these two worldviews. In what follows, "those books" turn out to be scientific books. The Big Bang theory is placed against a religious myth of origin (evoked by a biblical "in the beginning"), which further stresses the contradictions between religion and atheism and between Islam and the non-Islamic:

> I wanted to tell him that in the beginning there was nothing and then suddenly there was a big bang, and that after that everything was set in motion, everything started to move, just like the Milky Way, which consisted of lots and lots of stars and was

93 Kader Abdolah, *The House of the Mosque* (2011): 12-18.
94 Kader Abdolah, *My Father's Notebook* (2006): 161.
95 Ibidem: 168-169.

> still in motion. I did my best. I tried to tell him, in our simple sign language, all that I had learned. But he stared at me in perplexed silence, thinking, what on earthy is he talking about? […] I'd wandered far away, so far away that I could no longer connect these theories with my "not praying". I stopped.[96]

What is lost in translation here, is the sense of transgression conveyed with the original Dutch expression "Ik was ver gegaan, heel ver, en een beetje verdwaald", phrased by Susan Massotty as "I'd wandered far away, so far away", but which can also be translated, albeit less eloquently, as: "I had gone far, very far, and I'd gotten a little lost". Thus, like in the story where "tradition" moves out of reach for those who cross borders – and boundaries – the notion is evoked here that the narrator has gone *too* far and that the person who comes into contact with the non-Islamic will be sanctioned.

In the stories discussed above, such as "The White Ships" and *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*, the son is forced to make a choice – between belonging in "the Western world" or being an 'alien' like his father or mother –, whereas in *My Father's Notebook* it is the father who has to choose. This is made even more poignant when Abdolah lets Ishmael stress that he and his deaf-mute father form a strict twofoldness: "We had to be one, to share one ideology. I had to bring him close to me, close to the new reality in my life, so he wouldn't get lost in the unfamiliar world of his son".[97] However, this being "one" disappeared after the Islamic Revolution. Now, father and son are diametrically opposed to each other:

> '[…] You wanted Khomeini to come and the shah to go. […] You took the shah's picture off the wall and hung up Khomeini's picture instead. You went out every day and demonstrated, together with thousands of people. Look in the mirror. You even have a long grey beard, like his.' [...] He looked in the mirror, toyed with his beard and seemed to make a startling discovery.[98]

The last sentence stresses the father's naivety – and that of the Iranian people, which he represents in the novel. The latter is emphasised by Abdolah in *My Father's Notebook* with the constant switching between Iranian history and descriptions of the domestic matters of Ishmael and his father, the latter becoming a sort of *mise en abymes* for national events. For example, a chapter in which Ishmael complains that despite reading "those books" together with him, his father has been "bewitched" by the followers of Khomeini who promise that the immanent coming of the Messiah will cure him of his deaf-muteness is followed by a chapter that starts with the following lines: "We [the communists] once

96 Ibidem: 169-170.
97 Ibidem: 185-186.
98 Ibidem: 226.

hoped to transform our country into a paradise. But we didn't know, or perhaps we didn't want to know, that neither the country, nor its people – nor we, for that matter – were ready for it […]. Actually, we deserved the regime of the mullahs".[99] However, this presents the father, and the people of Iran with him, as being very passive – just like the Muslims in Abdolah's stories that are set in the Netherlands.

This generation gap can also be found in *The House of the Mosque*, but in this text the violent confrontation between unbelievers and fundamentalist Muslims plays an equally important role. Thus, a triangular division of characters is created, with orthodox Muslims, leftist guerrillas and fundamentalists each with their mutual conflicts. Fundamentalism, which had always been a faceless threat in Abdolah's work, is now exemplified by some of the characters in *The House of the Mosque*. This changes the narrative function of the orthodox characters. They are no longer the main representatives of Islam as a religion of prohibition and exclusivity, but rather represent wisdom and the spirituality of the Muslim faith – a development we have also seen in Abdolah's op-eds and columns. While the confrontation between the leftist guerrillas and the ayatollahs turns the clash between the Islamic and the non-Islamic into a matter of life and death, the elder generation of orthodox Muslims now represents 'good' Islam that is opposed with 'bad' fundamentalist Islam.

The opposition between these two forms of Islam is exemplified in two conversations, two crucial moments in the plot of *The House of the Mosque*. Both conversations take place after one of the sons of the eponymous house of the mosque is arrested because of his communist sympathies. The first conversation is between Aqa Jaan, head of the extended family of the house and his nephew Shahbal. Shahbal has just been released from prison, where he ended up because of his communist sympathies. His influential uncle has ensured his release. When Aqa Jaan asks his nephew why he was carrying a "communist book" when he was arrested, his nephew does not really give an answer, but starts explaining that he no longer feels "at home in the mosque", adding: "I've lost my faith".[100] We can discern a similarity with *My Father's Notebook*, where it was also reasoned that once a person starts reading non-Islamic books, that person loses the ability to pray. Aqa Jaan responds by saying he regrets his nephew's

99 Ibidem: 219-225.

100 Kader Abdolah, *The House of the Mosque* (2010): 211. The Dutch original text is not as definitive as Susan Massotty's translation, as Shahbal phrases losing his religion in the present tense: "[i]k verlies mijn geloof, ik voel me niet meer thuis in de moskee". Thus, although he says he is "past the doubting stage" earlier in the conversation, it is presented more as an ongoing process in the Dutch original. Cf. Kader Abdolah, *Het huis van de moskee* (2005): 205.

decisions, but adds: "I'm not mistaken. I trust you".[101] This conversation is doubled later on the narrative when another son, Jawad, is arrested at the exact same spot as Shahbal, thus inviting the reader to compare the two situations. Instead of Aqa Jaan's fatherly resignation, the Muslim now merely expresses a blind hatred. This is Khalkhal, an ayatollah who was once a member of the family of the house of the mosque, but has since joined Khomeini's oppressive regime and has become "Allah's judicial envoy". As in the first conversation, a dichotomy between Islamic and non-Islamic is created when Khalkhal begins his interrogation by saying: "The first question: Are you a Communist, or do you believe in Islam" – ruling out the possibility of a middle way.[102]

However, the programmed slogans that Abdolah's brave freedom fighter declaims during the interrogation emphasise that we are dealing with a 'bad' Islam. Abdolah has Jawad crying: "I will never kneel for the man who had hundreds of Kurds executed in one day". The partisan concludes that Khalkhal's actions are a "crime in the eyes of the Koran".[103] The point is clearly driven home to the reader: Khalkhal is a horrible criminal and his deeds should not be seen as representing the Muslim faith in its entirety. Abdolah makes this even clearer to his Western readers by having Khalkhal join the Taliban at the end of the novel.[104] The character of Khalkhal is based on Hojjatol-Islam Sadeq Givi, also known as Sadeq Khalkhali, who ordained the mass murder of the 'enemies of the revolution' after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In reality, a Shi'ite like Khalkhali would never be allowed to join the strictly Sunni Taliban. However, Khalkhali is not well-known among Abdolah's Western readers. But when *The House of the Mosque* was published, "Taliban" could easily function as a *signalling word*, as I called it in chapter two. It immediately recalls connotations of fanatic and dangerous Muslims.

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101 Ibidem.

102 Kader Abdolah, *The House of the Mosque* (2010): 353. Strange as it may sound, this middle way does exist. There have been several movements that have combined communist ideas with a Muslim liberation theology throughout the Muslim world of the twentieth century. One example of these would be the Iranian Shi'ite Mujâhidîn (not to be confused with the Afghan fundamentalist Sunnite Mujâhidîn – the word itself meaning 'those who engage in jihad'), a leftist Muslim resistance group that turned against the regime of the ayatollahs after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The vehement struggle for power that followed is described by Abdolah in two short chapters in *The House of the Mosque*. Cf. ibidem: 367-381.

103 Ibidem: 354. In the Dutch original, Jawad's words are stronger: "Het is een misdaad jegens de Koran", which would literally translate as 'a crime against the Koran', i.e. not only prohibited by a genuine interpretation of the Koran, but even directed against the religion itself. Kader Abdolah, *Het huis van de moskee* (2005): 339.

104 Ibidem: 400.

The decision to use the Taliban in his novel about the Islamic Revolution in Iran fits the didacticism of Abdolah's literary project that I mentioned earlier. This also applies to the somewhat simplistic representations of orthodox Muslims and the contrast between the Islamic and the non-Islamic in *My Father's Notebook* and *The House of the Mosque*, which resemble the representations in the stories set in the Netherlands. The (Western) reader must realise how deep the gap is between 'East' and 'West' and between 'Islamic' and 'non-Islamic' and must realise the extent of the confusion and suffering that are caused when there is an encounter between these two worlds. To ensure that they do, the author uses certain Orientalist stereotypes that this reader will easily recognise, such as the harmless, passive Muslim and the dangerous active Muslim.

4.2.3. Bridging the gap

Dutch critic Xandra Schutte mentions in the review of *Of Girls and Partisans* quoted above that "Kader Abdolah seems to claim it is impossible to build a bridge between the two worlds [i.e. Iran and the Netherlands]".[105] Arguably, this applies to most of Abdolah's literary work. As noted before, there is a remarkable tension between Abdolah's claim that his literary work is meant as a bridge between 'East' and 'West' on the one hand and on the other hand the fact that his stories are mainly about communication breakdowns and animosity between Muslims and non-Muslims, and about the impossibility of contact between their worlds and the mutual exclusivity of Islamic and non-Islamic spaces. This tension is not only evident between Abdolah's literary work and his contributions to literary and public debates; it can also be found in the short stories and novels themselves. Firstly, there is a contradiction between the content of the narrative and its form. While the stories stress the impossibility of the coexistence and mixing of the Islamic and non-Islamic and the Iranian and Dutch, they take the shape, as explained in Section 4.1., of a juxtaposition of quotes from Dutch literature and Persian and Islamic texts. Secondly, there are a few passages in which the characters do succeed in creating a space for an Iranian, Muslim tradition in the West, or vice versa. These seem to belie the conviction that there can be no real contact between the different worlds. This conviction permeates the rest of Abdolah's work, however, and indeed, since these passages only deal with short moments, unstable solutions or fairy tale-like utopias they too ultimately confirm this conviction.

The notion that 'East' and 'West' blend together in Abdolah's work through the juxtaposition of different literary traditions is symbolised in the stories by

105 "Kader Abdolah lijkt aan te geven dat er geen brug te bouwen is tussen de twee werelden". Xandra Schutte, "Wie weg is, is weg" (1993).

the recurrent image of bookshelves containing 'Eastern' and 'Western' texts. In "The White Ships", for instance, the narrator claims there are only three books on his bookshelves: "a collection of poetry by a Dutch poet […] and a collection of poetry by a Medieval Persian poet. And […] a 'Holy Book' [the Koran]".[106] Besides the image of a multicultural bookshelf, there are several other images symbolising the blending of 'East' and 'West' scattered through Abdolah's stories. These images seem to challenge the supposed mutual exclusion of the Netherlands and Islam. In "Fagrimoloek" there is a "porcelain windmill", a souvenir from the Netherlands that the mother takes home. It reminds her of the Dutch wind that wanted to "take away" her veil.[107] Thus, a space is created in Iran for both the threat and the liberation that the Netherlands offers ("The Netherlands is an ideal country for girls and young women. They're free", the mother tells her Iranian friend[108]). And as described earlier, the weather cock (an object normally found on church towers) that is used to point towards Mecca in *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles* gives a Christian artefact a Muslim function.

In *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles*, two more explicit examples can be found of a space being created for the Islamic in the Netherlands and vice versa. The story of the encounter between Bolfazl's mother and his homosexual neighbour René may be a story of incompatibilities, however, it ends with a certain synthesis: Abdolah has the mother move slightly towards the non-Islamic and René slightly towards the Islamic. When the mother's return to Iran is described, we read: "one thing was clear to me. [René's partner] went back with my mother. He carried her suitcase and sat down next to her on the aeroplane. Back to my parental house to give her nightmares".[109] This synthesis may only exist in the mother's nightmares, but that does not make it any less definite. This movement of the non-Islamic towards the Islamic is mirrored in the story by a reversed intrusion of the Islamic in the Netherlands. After René has committed suicide, Bolfazl presides over his funeral. Standing next to the deceased René, his neighbour who embodied the "symbol of the Netherlands" and all that is "prohibited" by Islam and who made it impossible for his mother to pray, Bolfazl succeeds in performing the Muslim funerary tradition – which, as we

106 "In mijn boekenkast staat nu alleen een bundel van een Nederlandse dichter […] en een bundel van een middeleeuwese Perzische dichter. Ook […] een 'heilig boek'". Kader Abdolah, *De adelaars* (1993): 104.

107 "[E]en porseleinen molen". Kader Abdolah, *De meisjes en de partizanen* (1995): 115.

108 "Nederland is een ideaal land voor meisjes, voor jongen vrouwen. Ze zijn vrij". Ibidem: 110.

109 "[E]én ding was voor mij duidelijk. Moka Moka ging met mijn moeder mee. Hij droeg haar koffer en ging naast haar in het vliegtuig zitten. Mee naar mijn ouderlijk huis om haar nachtmerries te bezorgen". Kader Abdolah, *De reis van de lege flessen* (1997): 40.

have seen, would be impossible in the Netherlands in any of Abdolah's other stories:

> The undertaker appeared and cried: 'Shall we begin?'
> [René's ex-wife] looked at me.
> 'Begin', I said.
> I stood in front of René's picture and hummed: 'Wa inna ilayhi rajiun.' [110]

Here, in the confusion of the "'in-between' space" a "beyond" is created, a short moment in which something new comes into existence. This is the most explicit example in Abdolah's work that shows that despite the unbridgeable differences between them it is possible to blend 'East' and 'West'. However, it is barely more convincing than the mother's nightmares: after all, the deceased René cannot talk back and a true dialogue between 'East' and 'West' is out of the question.

Considering that the contradictions between the Islamic and non-Islamic are nowhere as vehement as they are in *The House of the Mosque*, it may come as some surprise that this novel also contains the least problematic blending of the Western world and Islam in Abdolah's oeuvre. At the end of the narrative, after the family of the house of the mosque has been torn apart by history and most of its members have been killed or exiled, Aqa Jaan visits his friend Hushang Khan. Khan is a larger-than-life character, presented as a typical wise seer. He lived in Paris during the nineteen sixties and has now retreated to the impenetrable mountains of northern Iran. Khan seems to live outside the strict division of Islamic and non-Islamic. He drinks homemade red wine, but when Aqa Jaan shows his disapproval, Khan says: "Don't look at me like that! […] You're not the only one who's read the Koran. I've read it too – in my own way".[111] Khan lives in a kind of utopian refuge, where the old man combines an idealised Persian way of life with his memories of Paris: "It had been a time of great upheaval, with demonstrators marching through the streets, existentialism in its heyday and Simone de Beauvoir captivating *tout le Paris* with her books".[112] In Khan's

110 "De begrafenisondernemer kwam tevoorschijn en riep: 'Zullen we beginnen?' [René's ex-vrouw] keek mij aan. 'Beginnen', zei ik. Ik ging voor de foto van René staan en neuriede: 'Wa enna eleihé radjeoen.'" Ibidem: 92. This Arabic line is the second part of the Muslim funerary prayer: 'Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi râji'ûn' (Koran 2:156, translated by Mohammed M. Pickthall as: "Lo! we are Allah's and lo! unto Him we are returning").

111 Kader Abdolah, *The House of the Mosque* (2010): 424.

112 Ibidem: 425. It is not clear to me why Susan Massotty has "*demonstrators* marching through the streets" rather than the 'leftist parties' ("linkse partijen") of the original and why she added the French "*tout le Paris*", which is not in the Dutch text. Cf. Kader Abdolah, *Het huis van de moskee* (2005): 405.

colony, Aqa Jaan finds the grave of Jawad, who was not allowed a burial site by the regime after Khalkhal ordered his execution. Here, Aqa Jaan also finds another son of his house, Ahmad, a liberal imam who has been chased away by the fundamentalists and has found peace as a farmhand with Hushang Khan and his family. Abdolah again uses the image of the bookshelf that contains both Eastern and Western traditions to stress the harmony of this utopian colony: Khan possesses a "massive bookcase […] lined with French and Persian books".[113] However, it is made clear that this is a location that lies outside quotidian reality: an inaccessible "closed colony, which was almost entirely self-sufficient", the house of a man who has "no contact with the outside world".[114] Khan is a kind of *Deus ex machina*, enabling the blending of 'East' and 'West' in the novel. Like the other moments where the gap between these two worlds is bridged, this utopian refuge, in which all story lines of the novel come together and a harmony between Iran and the West and the Islamic and non-Islamic is established, seems surreal after the narrative that precedes it. It reads as though Abdolah wanted to give *The House of the Mosque* a happy end, no matter what.

5. Concluding remarks

The most striking aspect of Kader Abdolah's work is not the "newness" or the "new signs of identity" made possible, according to Bhabha, in the clash of cultures and the resulting "'in-between' spaces". Rather, it is the familiarity and recognisability of the contrasting images of 'the Muslim world' and 'the West'. In an essentialist dialectics, the supposedly great differences between these worlds become the central theme of Abdolah's stories about encounters between the Islamic and non-Islamic. It is this essentialism by juxtaposition that creates Bhabha's "beyond", and makes the hybridisation that comes with it virtually impossible. 'East' and 'West' do meet, but because of the fundamental difference that divides them, there is no real dialogue, no blending. That is a remarkable conclusion, since Abdolah himself describes his work in interviews and columns in a way that reminds us of Bhabha's 'newness'.

The same paradox can be found in the literary work itself. The two goals that Abdolah claims to aim for with his literature, viz. to testify and be a bridge between cultures, seem to interfere with each other. In order for the stories to

113 Kader Abdolah, *The House of the Mosque* (2010): 422. Lost in translation here is the fact that Abdolah seems to stress how remarkable it is that these two literary traditions are juxtaposed by writing that the bookcase contains '*both* French and Persian books' ("*zowel* Franse als Perzische boeken"). Cf. Kader Abdolah, *Het huis van de moskee* (2005): 402, italics added.

114 Kader Abdolah, *The House of the Mosque* (2010): 414-415.

function as a "testimony", the pain and confusion caused by the gap between 'East' and 'West' are foregrounded to such an extent that the encounters between these cultures can hardly be examples of a successful bridging of this gap. Despite Abdolah's claims that he wants to contribute to a more harmonious multicultural society, his stories seem to suggest that such harmony can barely exist. Abdolah has claimed that one of the main contributions of "black authors" is that their "characters march into the rural estate of Dutch literature with their veils and carpets". The veiled mother and the father with a Persian carpet under his arm in Abdolah's own work, however, remain strange, exotic elements in the Dutch settings in which he places them.

Thus, the Muslims in Abdolah's work never really become part of Dutch society. The characters of Muslim origin who settle in the Netherlands are no longer Muslims. In his stories, Muslims only exist in Iran, or temporarily and with great difficulty in the Netherlands. In fact, the two settings of his stories mirror each other: Iran, on the other hand, offers no space for non-Islamic characters, who are either killed or exiled. It is this mutual exclusivity and the fundamental difference between these two worlds that is foregrounded in Abdolah's literary juxtaposition of 'East' and 'West'. This is strengthened by the fact that Abdolah continuously pairs stereotypes. The pious Muslims next to the loose West. The leftist, intellectual ideas of a son next to the naïve faith of his deaf-mute father. The idealistic communist next to Allah's cruel judicial envoy. The family elder's inspiring faith next to the ayatollahs' fundamentalism.

The literary form that Abdolah chooses for his stories, that juxtaposes Persian classics and the Koran with a Dutch literary tradition, actually makes little difference here. The way in which Abdolah quotes from 'Eastern' and 'Western' holy texts and literary traditions mainly foregrounds the 'authentic' character of the culture from which they stem. Thus it remains a form of contrasting and seldom turns into a real hybrid form. Again, there is a paradox between this characteristic of his work and the fact that the author himself has always presented his work as a mixing of 'Eastern' and 'Western' literary traditions. The multicultural bookcase is indeed a fitting image for Abdolah's oeuvre: Persian, Muslim and Dutch texts neatly stand back to back, but form no singular text.

Thus, just as in his columns and interviews, the difference of 'Islam' and 'the West' in Abdolah's literary work remains one of fundamental differences. Moreover, in dichotomies such as the one between 'East' and 'West', Islam functions as a dividing force: between the younger and elder generation, between Iran and the Western world, between the religious and communists, the parents losing their children when they become leftist or Dutch, the children losing their parents when they are "bewitched" by religion. It has to be said, however, that the short stories and novels do give some clues that seem to put all of

this in perspective. Especially the early stories are narrated as a plea, with the narrator trying to prove that he has deserved a place in Dutch society by stressing the Muslim alienness of his parents. This makes the reader wonder whether the parents can really be that naïve or whether, to phrase it differently, their thinking really is as "round as the domes of […] mosques" as the narrator's rhetoric suggests. Thus, the reader can resist the narrator's discourse and sympathise with characters that seem to represent a different point of view. After all, literature leaves more space than most op-eds and columns for the reader to ask such questions – whether or not manipulated by the author to do so.

This does not negate, however, that essentialism is an important basic assumption for these stories. It is precisely the fundamental difference between 'East' and 'West' that drives most of Abdolah's plots. If that difference did not exist, it would not be so difficult to bridge the gap between these two worlds – and this difficulty is one of the most important themes of these texts. Thus, they are informed by an inescapable paradox. The necessity to create a unity is stated, after which the incompatibility of the two worlds is stressed, which in its turn makes clear the necessity of something or someone who can unify them. In the next chapters, we will see how Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza and – although to a lesser extent – Robert Anker solve a similar issue by presenting categories such as 'East' and 'West', or 'Islam' and 'the Netherlands', as constructions, figments of imagination and fictions in their literary work: with that, the differences between them become a matter of perspective. In Abdolah's work a solution is impossible. The deep gap between the two spaces in which his work is set is not a construction; it just happens to be there.

When Abdolah does describe moments in which the gap between 'East' and 'West' is bridged, these descriptions rather seem to stress the general validity of this gap. These are *dei ex machina* that seem forced: a reclusive paradise or the personal discourse of a narrator who recites the Koran standing next to the coffin of a deceased Dutch homosexual (which could be called a form of cultural mediation as well, but one in which real dialogue is not possible, since a corpse cannot react). Only in such places and moments do the questions that play such an important role in the rest of Abdolah's work cease to matter: is something Islamic or non-Islamic? Where do the different characters stand in this dichotomy? Who is what? However, the utopian character of these short-lived 'solutions' first and foremost illustrate the impossibility of the harmony that characterises them, which in the end foregrounds these questions again.

4. Abdelkader Benali

But one has to choose. So I chose a third way and wrote books.

Pär Rådström

1. Beyond Islam and the West

In his second novel, *The Long Awaited* (*De langverwachte*, 2002), Abdelkader Benali chose a most peculiar narrator: an unborn child. From the womb, she creates a unity from the family histories of her Dutch mother and her Moroccan father, by merging them into one narrative: "I make individuals into a family, forge a mutual past to which they can have no reply".[1] This narrator represents an important theme in both Benali's literary work and his contributions to the public and literary debate: the necessity to neutralise the clash of civilisations that has gripped Dutch society by blurring the borders between the 'Muslim' and the 'non-Muslim', between 'Moroccan' and 'Dutch'. The unborn child, who calls itself the Long Awaited – a reference to the Muslim Messiah, whose one of many names is 'the awaited' – personifies what we could call Benali's personal myth of escape and liberation: an escape from an oppressive Muslim background and a liberation from a society that forces its members to choose between 'Muslim' and 'Western'.

Because this is an *unborn* child, the novel poignantly poses the question whether the hybrid that she symbolises is at all possible. That question, and the fact that it remains unanswered, can be viewed as illustrative of Benali's outlook on society. On the one hand, the author argues that the different segments that make up Dutch society should mix more. On the other hand, he seems to conclude that this can only really happen outside that society – for instance, in an autonomous literature where society's suffocating borders are invalid. In the fictional worlds of his literary works this paradox is represented by ideal situations that are impossible to realise, such as the shelter of the womb in which the narrator of *The Long Awaited* finds herself. Time and again, his work implies that outside such refuges, hybridisation is seen as undesirable or impossible, as a "depraved borderland". That quote comes, as I wrote in the introduction, from the exaggeratedly Muslim friend of the main character in *The Long Awaited*. During a conversation that takes place just before this main character, the Moroccan Mehdi, sleeps with his girlfriend Diana (which results in the conception of the narrator), this friend, Boedoeft, warns him for the consequences of a ren-

1 "Ik maak van individuen een familie, smeed hier een gezamenlijk verleden waar ze niet van terug hebben". Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 8.

dezvous with a Dutch girl. Mehdi risks losing his identity, according to Boedoeft: "She wants to lure you to the other side, and then we'll have lost you [...]. She'll devour your face, wash your nose and ears away and then she'll silence you".[2] This is a situation that can be found in almost all the stories that Benali published between 1990 and 2005: the curious trespasser of borders is confronted with a hysterical border guard. This opposition raises the question what the consequences might be of encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims. A hybridisation of cultures that will lead to interesting new identities? Or a clash of cultures in which sides have to be chosen and identities will be lost?

The fact that the novel's narrator is herself a hybrid of Moroccan and Dutch, or Muslim and Western, and the caricatured way in which the Muslim fear of the non-Muslim is represented here (Mehdi's friend suggesting it would be a good idea to wash his girlfriend before having sex with her, so that no remains of pig meat or alcohol will enter the bed[3]) can be seen as an answer to that question. And yet there is a certain ambiguity, in this text and in Benali's work in general. The hybridisation and the blurring of borders that Benali suggests as solutions for social problems caused by the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands are presented in many different ways in his work, but are also made problematic by suggesting that there is no real place for them. In his short stories, novels and theatre plays, the main characters are often picaresque border trespassers who disrupt the strictly hierarchical demarcations between 'East' and 'West', 'inside' and 'outside', and 'Muslim' and 'Dutch'. At the same time, society and its fiercely guarded borders make these characters suffer. Benali's stories are half picaresque novel, half *Bildungsroman*: the trespasser of borders is a young man coming of age, in search of his place in the world, who not only upsets or unmasks as ridiculous the strict separations between 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim', but is victimised by them as well.

This chapter discusses how the plot of these stories about the trespassing of borders is formed by a dialectics. The most important opposition here is not the one between 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim', with a hybrid of the two as a solution; rather, it is the one between the untenable withdrawn Muslim existence, in which the confrontation with the non-Muslim is avoided, and its antitheses, the "depraved borderland" of the encounter of cultures in which one's identity is determined by others and one is forced to choose. The solution is, interestingly enough, a new withdrawal, or, more to the point, a *backing out* of society: in the

2 "Ze wil je aan de andere kant krijgen en dan zijn we je kwijt [...]. Ze vreet je gezicht op, wast je neus en oren eraf en maakt je mond dood". Ibidem: 264-266.

3 Ibidem: 266.

end, the characters decide to seek safety in their own utopias. Here we recognise the end of Kader Abdolah's *The House of the Mosque* (*Het huis van de moskee*, 2005), in which a utopian location is described where the strict borders between 'Islam' and the 'West' no longer exist. High in the mountains, secluded from the outside world, these worlds can finally mix freely, while they are separated by a deep divide in the rest of Abdolah's work. In Abdelkader Benali's literary work, refuges appear much more frequently. As I will argue in this chapter, these represent the author's opinion of the social function of literature.

Like Kader Abdolah, Benali's outlook on society, his conception of literature and his style and thematics interlink. The idea is proposed that the problems in society can be solved through literature: as opposed to the coercion to choose within society, the author presents his literary work as a place where one does not have to choose, but where everything comes together. However, Benali differs greatly from Abdolah in the way he executes this interlinking. As I discussed in the last chapter, Abdolah's literary project is symbolised in his stories by the image of a bookcase with 'Eastern' and 'Western' classics: a juxtaposing – which often is a mere posing against each other – of two 'authentic' traditions. In Benali's literature, rather, it is lies, imagination and the masks of an actor that play an important role. Here we can recognise the author's preference for the non-authentic, the perversion of tradition and the twisting of the truth into a hybrid fantasy. His stories receive their dynamics from the tensions between 'East' and 'West' and the author gives these a central place in his plots. Using the words of Homi K. Bhabha, whom I mentioned in the last chapter, this can be phrase as follows: Benali locates the "beyond" truly beyond the chaos of the "'in-between' space" and its clashing cultures.[4]

After a short biography and an overview of the work that Benali published between 1990 and 2005, I will discuss how the dialectics mentioned above can be recognised in Benali's outlook on society and literature. I will then analyse how this dialectics informs his literary work about encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims.

2. Short biography and publication overview

Abdelkader Benali was born in 1975 in the village of Ighazzazen (Morocco). At the age of four he moved to Rotterdam, joining his father who had set up an Islamic butcher's shop there. His upbringing was strict: "I either had to help in the butcher's shop or go to the mosque. The outside world was demonised, every-

4 See last chapter, page 46.

thing that happened there was miserable".[5] When he was nineteen years old, Benali started to enter writing competitions. He won several of them, among others the 1994 and 1995 El Hizjra Literary Prize, awarded by the Arabic cultural centre El Hizjra in Amsterdam as an incentive prize for young authors of Moroccan or Arabic descent in the Netherlands. His win drew the attention of the Vassallucci publishing company. Remarkably soon after, his debut, *Wedding by the Sea* (*Bruiloft aan zee*, 1996, English translation published 2000), appeared, a book that the author says would never have been written if Vassallucci had not contacted him.[6] At first, *Wedding by the Sea* was largely ignored by Dutch critics, but after the book was shortlisted for the prestigious national Libris Literature Prize in 1997, Benali made a spectacular breakthrough. He did not win the Libris Literature Prize in 1997, but was awarded the Geert-Jan Lubberhuizen Prize for best debut that year and in 1999 he received the Prix du Meilleur Premier Roman Étranger for the French translation of his first novel. *Wedding by the Sea* was translated into Norwegian, Hungarian, English, Italian, German and Danish.

In the following years, Benali became active as a columnist and later an author of op-eds in several national Dutch newspapers and magazines. Especially after the 9/11 attacks, Benali wrote many op-eds about the position of Islam, Muslims and Moroccans in Dutch society. Around that same time, he wrote several theatre texts for the production company De Toneelschuur. Three of these, *The Unfortunate One* (*De Ongelukkige*, 1999), *Yasser* (2001) and *Unclean* (*Onrein*, 2003) were published by Vassallucci. *Yasser*, which was also performed in English by the theatre group Studio Dubbelagent, won the Mr. H.G. van der Vlies Prize (a Dutch prize for theatre texts) in 2002. In 2001 a collection of columns, stories and essays appeared, titled *Messages from Poppy Seed City* (*Berichten uit Maanzaad Stad*). This collection of stories and essays of varying quality was dismissed by critics as an attempt to get a piece of the pie during that year's Book Week, as its theme "writing between two cultures" caused an increase of interest in so-called '*allochtonous* authors'. For this Book Week, Benali also edited *Promise to the World* (*Belofte aan de wereld*, 2001), a collection of short stories published in cooperation with NOVIB (the Dutch affiliate of the international Oxfam organisation). In his introduction, the author deems the theme of the Book Week irrelevant, which is in line with his usual attitude to-

5 "Ik moest helpen in de slagerij, of naar de moskee. De buitenwereld werd gedemoniseerd, alles wat daar gebeurde was ellendig". Cited in Arjan Visser, "Ik moest wachten" (2003).

6 Judith Koelemeijer, "Literatuur moet ernstig zijn, dacht ik toen nog" (1997).

wards the expectation that a multicultural background can provide a certain literary quality.

In 2002 *The Long Awaited* appeared, which was awarded the Libris Literature Prize the following year. Although critics were mostly positive about Benali's second novel, several of them noticed that it was very badly edited. The number of spelling errors and stylistic mistakes is indeed remarkable, not only in the first edition of the book, but even in the second (2003) and tenth (2005) revised editions. Possibly because of discontent with the editing of his work, Benali left Vassallucci in 2004. His last publication for this publishing company was the theatre play *Unclean* in 2003. In 2002 the novel *The Argentinian* (*De Argentijn*), a commissioned work distributed for free in Rotterdam libraries during that year's Festival of the Reader, was published by publishing company Aristos. In 2003 the small publishing company Uitgeverij 521 published Benali's debut as a poet, *Poems for the Summer* (*Gedichten voor de zomer*). This collection of poetry appeared in the prestigious Sandwich series, edited by famous Dutch poet and literary *éminence grise* Gerrit Komrij.

While Benali's next novel for Vassallucci, *The Speaking Bushes of Iwojen* (*De sprekende struiken van Iwojen*), was ready for printing in 2004, the author announced his transfer to De Arbeiderspers. *The Speaking Bushes of Iwojen* was never published. Instead, he had his third regular novel published: *Let there be Good Weather Tomorrow* (*Laat het morgen mooi weer zijn*). The author has claimed that this book announces a "new phase" in his writing career.[7] Indeed, the exuberant style that had characterised his work until then – and which has been both praised and run into the ground by critics – had been toned down in *Let there be Good Weather Tomorrow* (as it had in his earlier novel *The Argentinian)*: the sentences are shorter and the imagery is less spectacular. In 2005, *Morocco Through Dutch Eyes* (*Marokko door Nederlandse ogen*) appeared, a book by historian Herman Obdeijn about the way in which Morocco has been perceived by the Dutch throughout the centuries. Benali illuminated Obdeijn's text with several fictional portraits of historical figures. The themes from his literary work – clashing cultures and a longing to transcend categories such as Moroccan and Dutch, Muslim and Christian – can clearly be recognised in these portraits.

3. Not to take a stand

Actively partaking in the public debate is far less obvious for Abdelkader Benali than it is for Kader Abdolah. In 2004 he complained to an interviewer: "No dis-

7 Cited in Lies Schut, "Het gevoel van opnieuw beginnen" (2005).

cussion about Moroccans or Islam goes by without the media calling me for a comment".[8] The author claims, however, that he is "no essayist who airs his opinion about 'Islam' or 'the crisis in Dutch society'".[9] Clear though this may sound, Benali has repeatedly taken part in the public debate about these issues. In 2002 he even invited the media to contact him, stirred by the rise of the populist anti-Islam politician Pim Fortuyn: "Writers have always been factors of power. So I have to say something about it. Who will stop this man? Whoever needs me can call me".[10] Despite his claim that he has no intention to air his opinion about Islam and troubles in Dutch society, he has done so repeatedly, in interviews and a large number of op-eds, published in the liberal newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* and the weekly left-wing magazine *Vrij Nederland*.[11]

This contradiction is characteristic for Benali. Especially when the relationship between (his) literature and society is concerned, the author tends to be inconsistent. One moment he will provocatively say that his debut, that deals with the standard themes of so-called migrant literature – identity, hybridity, the gap between the culture of the country of descent and Western society – could "just as well [have been] about kidney beans".[12] The next moment he will claim that he refuses to react to social troubles in the media because: "I'd rather put my social comment in my work".[13] This inconsistency can partly be explained by the fact that as a very young debutant (he was twenty-one when *Wedding by the Sea* appeared), Benali might have been searching for the right *posture*. On the one hand, him stressing his descent and showing an engagement with migrant

8 "Er hoeft maar een discussie over Marokkanen of de islam plaats te vinden of ik word gebeld door de media om commentaar". Cited in Arjan Peters, "Ik zeg liever op papier dat man en vrouw gelijk zijn" (2004).

9 "Ik ben geen essayist die uitspraken ventileert over 'de islam' of 'de crisis in de Nederlandse samenleving'". Ibidem. About Benali's use of the terms "essayist" and "essay", see below, note 22.

10 "Schrijvers zijn altijd machtsfactoren geweest. Dus ik moet er iets van zeggen. Wie stopt deze man? Wie me nodig heeft kan me bellen". Cited in Peter Ouwerkerk, "Benali bestrijdt met het woord" (2002).

11 Among others: "Moslims rouwen niet met drie minuten stilte" (2001, about the possible consequenses in the Netherlands of the 9/11 attacks); "Zwijgzaamheid niet met thee op te lossen" (2002, about the generation gap between Muslim fathers and their sons that became clear after the 9/11 attacks); "Waarom zwijgen de Nederlanders?" (2002, about the public debate caused by the 9/11 attacks); "Voor Zonnekoning is artikel 1 maar lastig" (2003, an attack on Pim Fortuyn's ideogy).

12 "Het had net zo goed over bruine bonen kunnen gaan". Cited in Judith Koelemeijer, "Literatuur moet ernstig zijn, dacht ik toen nog" (1997).

13 "[I]k stop mijn commentaar liever in mijn werk". Cited in Arjan Peters, "Ik zeg liever op papier dat man en vrouw gelijk zijn" (2004).

issues probably yielded attention for his literary work. On the other hand, Benali might have felt it was expedient to embrace a somewhat more autonomist literary outlook, since it was definitely not uncontroversial at the time to present descent as being literary relevant.[14] In the end, Benali was able to have his cake and eat it by continuously mentioning identity and descent in relation to his work, but at the same time stressing that it was 'others' who deemed these relevant while he himself valued nothing more than the autonomy of literature and deemed the relationship between an author's background and his or her work irrelevant. Apart from that, Benali has covered himself, as it were, against reproaches of inconsistence from the outset of his writing career by provocatively pointing out that he may be speaking in bad faith when talking about his position as an author. A writer wants to sell himself and will therefore say what his audience wants to hear, according to Benali.

At the same time, Benali's inconsistency and feigned elusiveness fit a certain basic attitude that have spoken increasingly clearly from his contributions to the public debate over the years. As I will discuss in Section 3.1., Benali claims that it is important not to take a stand in a society where clearly demarcated identities intensify the clash of civilisations. Benali's *posture* is characterised by a tendency to present himself as a live version of the picaresque transgressors of borders in his stories, as someone who places provocation and ambiguity against the coercion to choose that has the Netherlands in its grip, as he says. However, because of this refusal to take a stand, his contributions to the public debate do tend to be noncommittal (both literally and figuratively). Benali proclaims a postmodern conception of art, identity and society, in which everything is a story that can be modified in any way one likes.

In Section 3.2., I will discuss how the social function of literature is to be found, according to Benali, in the fact that, in contrast to the public debate, a person is not coerced to take a stand in literature, where it becomes possible for usto tell (or rather, invent) our own stories. This is the earlier-mentioned notion of literature as a refuge, which functions as a kind of myth of escape and liberation in Benali's texts. Paradoxically, the author combines an autonomist conception of literature with a certain engagement. This engagement lies in the writer's refusal to take a stand in the public debate and his readiness to offer his literature as a way out of the contradictions that characterise this debate.

14 Cf. the introduction to this study, Section 4.1. and the last chapter, page 46-47.

3.1. Society as an "identity industry"

Whether he wanted to take a stand or not, Benali emphatically intervened in the public debate after 9/11. Most of all he agitated against an essentialist conception of identity and descent: according to Benali, this conception is the main reason for the tensions between Muslims and the Dutch. On the one hand, he reproaches Muslims for withdrawing from Dutch society because they fear a loss of identity. On the other hand, he reproaches the Dutch for intensifying this need for withdrawal as they continuously stress the strangeness of these Others. Thus, if Benali is to be believed, the solution for the conflict between the 'Dutch' or 'the West' and 'Islam' is very simple: let go of the strict separation between these categories, remember that the difference between them is purely imaginary and mix them as much as possible. Benali stresses that a current longing for pureness must be replaced with a belief in hybridisation and he contrasts the threat of a clash of civilisations with a cheerful mixing of cultures. As said, this testifies of a postmodern optimism that reminds one of Lyotard's thesis that the grand narratives ("grands récits") with their oppressive conceptions of truth will increasingly be replaced with little, or local narratives – which lead to liberation for the individual.[15]

Benali's dislike of essentialism is, as noted before, an important difference between him and Kader Abdolah. An essentialist conception of identity is unrealistic, according to Benali, especially in contemporary multicultural Dutch society. In an interview from 2005, the interviewer notes how the author gets worked up about this:

> 'Consider an African who ends up in [an Amsterdam suburb]. He will become a different person, because his surroundings will view him in a new way.' The necessity that society forces upon us to choose is an issue for Benali, something that he has grown to thoroughly dislike over the past years. Fiercely: 'We live in an identity industry.'[16]

The word Benali uses here, "identity industry", suggests a mass production of 'authenticity': arguably, a person's only option is to choose between prefab identities in an "identity industry".

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15 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984): 37-41.

16 "'Denk aan een Afrikaan die in de Bijlmer belandt. Die wordt een ander mens omdat zijn omgeving op een nieuwe manier naar hem kijkt.' De door de maatschappij opgelegde dwang om te kiezen is een issue voor Benali, iets wat hem de laatste jaren steeds meer is tegen gaan staan. Fel: 'We leven in een identiteitsindustrie.'" Cited and paraphrased in Linda Schut, "Het gevoel van opnieuw beginnen" (2005).

According to Benali this is the reason why many young people of Muslim descent living in the West have become "unable to manage the shaky balance between *east is east and west is west*", especially after 9/11.[17] Departing from an essentialist conception of what it means to be a Muslim, these young people are forced to take a stand, not only by Dutch society, but also by the Muslim community. Benali links this coercion to choose to Huntington's notion of a 'clash of civiliations':

> It is a conscious tactic of these suicide bombers [of the 2004 attacks in the London metro] and [Theo van Gogh's murderer] Mohammed B. to place their own community before a dilemma without a solution: you have to choose whether you're on our side or on the other. The myth of the clash of civilisations has found in them its practical executioners.[18]

This is not merely the result of the rise of fundamentalism, but also of the poor integration of the first generation of migrants:

> The elderly Muslims in the Netherlands have become increasingly conservative, their religion has become almost sectarian because they do not test their ideas against reality. Everything stays inside, there simply is no outside. They arrived as strangers [...] and they have never succeeded to bridge that enormous gap. They seek consolation with increasingly stricter imams because their world is becoming increasingly smaller.[19]

While Abdolah presents himself as a spokesperson for migrants and Muslims, Benali attempts to make clear that he is different. *He* does not stay "inside": "Moroccans live in a kind of parallel world [...]. *I* say: you have to tear down those walls, you have to become a part of your surroundings, so that you can

17 "[D]eze welopgevoede, intelligente jongens die voor zichzelf dat wankele evenwicht tussen east is east and west is west niet meer konden bolwerken". Abdelkader Benali, "De godsdienstwaanzinnige is terug" (2005).

18 "Het is een bewuste tactiek van de zelfmoordenaars [die de aanslagen in de Londense metro pleegden in 2004] en Mohammed B. geweest om de eigen gemeenschap voor een onoplosbaar dilemma te stellen: je moet kiezen of je aan onze kant staat of aan de andere. De mythe van de botsing der beschavingen heeft in hen de uitvoerders van de praxis gekregen". Ibidem.

19 "De oudere moslims in Nederland worden alsmaar conservatiever, hun geloof wordt haast sektarisch doordat ze hun denkbeelden niet toetsen aan de werkelijkheid. Alles blijft binnen, buiten bestaat niet. Ze zijn als vreemdelingen […] binnengekomen en het is hun nooit gelukt die enorme kloof te overbruggen. Ze zoeken troost bij steeds strengere imams omdat hun wereld steeds kleiner wordt". Cited in Arjan Visser, "Ik moest wachten" (2003).

also reap its fruits".[20] Benali uses physical metaphors in his comments on the separation between Moroccans and Muslims on the one hand and the rest of Dutch society on the other, and he presents the social demarcations in a spatial manner when he talks about "inside" and "outside" and the necessity to "tear down walls". Thus, he uses the same metaphors for his non-literary work as those that can be found throughout his literary work, as I will discuss in Section 4. of this chapter.

Benali's solution for this situation is quite obvious: people should not accept the strict separations between cultures and they should refuse to scrupulously stick to the rules of their religion or stay within a strict demarcation of their own community:

> The question is then: [...] How will the harmony of an Eastern spirit wearing a Western coat be brought about? [...] It is [the second] generation [of Muslims in the Netherlands] who will have to manage this. Abandoning the black-and-white mind-set (you either pray or you drink *Glühwein*) is a first step, maybe even the biggest.[21]

The harmony between 'East' and 'West' can, in other words, only come about when 'East' stops being 'East' and 'West' is no longer 'West' – or when Muslims start drinking *Glühwein*. In the last chapter, we saw that the outlook on society put forward by Kader Abdolah (i.e. that there is a gap between 'East' and 'West' that causes mutual incomprehension and miscommunication between 'the Dutch' and 'Muslims') implicitly functioned as a recommendation of his own work (in which that gap is bridged). With Benali we see something similar: the author presents his literary work as a kind of solution for the social issues surrounding the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands.

3.2. Literature as a "refuge"

As noted before, Benali links the conception of an autonomous literature with the notion that literature can play an important social role. According to the author, it is precisely because literature is autonomous that it offers the possibility to "abandon the black-and-white mindset" – and thus also offers a solution for

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20 "Marokkanen leven in een soort parallelwereld […]. *Ik* vind: je moet die muren juist doorbreken, je moet onderdeel worden van de omgeving, waardoor je er ook de vruchten van kan plukken". Geciteerd in Ricci Scheldwacht, zonder titel (2002). Italics added.

21 "De vraag is dan: […] Hoe wordt de harmonie van een oosterse geest in een westers jasje bewerkstelligd? […]. Het is [de tweede] generatie [moslims in Nederland] die dat voor elkaar moet krijgen. Het opgeven van het zwart-witdenken (of je bidt of je drinkt Glühwein) is al een stap, misschien wel de grootste." Abdelkader Benali, "De godsdienstwaanzinnige is terug" (2005).

the problems of the Dutch "identity industry". As a writer, Benali has a liberty that he would not otherwise have as a Moroccan in Dutch society. On the one hand, literature made it possible for him to escape the parallel world into which his Moroccan community had withdrawn. On the other hand, literature offered a refuge from the "coercion to choose" in Dutch society. This is precisely why Benali resists the notion, enthusiastically put forward by Abdolah, that there is a relationship between his descent and the literary value of his work. He does, however, provocatively claim that he might suggest his work has a certain 'exotic authenticity': a foreign descent has, after all, a certain market value, he says. With that, Benali creates a certain ambiguity: can we trust the author when he speaks about literature and society, or is he just increasing the market value of his work?

Benali often contrasts the advantages of literature with the disadvantages of taking part in the public debate: "In my literature, I want to keep this discourse in which I give various voices and mentalities equal opportunities by playing them off against each other. In an essay, you have to choose a side, lock yourself in a polarisation".[22] This is a remarkable conclusion for an author who regularly published op-eds – or 'essays', as he calls it himself – at the time of the interview from which this quote is taken. However, Benali presents "choosing a side" and "locking yourself in a polarisation" as a threat to his autonomous position as an author:

> We live in polarised times and the question is easily put forward: which group do I belong to? I am always under pressure, both from the Moroccan community and from the... let's call them the Amsterdam libertines. [...] I am ashamed to be used as ammunition [...]. As a writer you have to cherish your independence.[23]

As long as this "independence" is guaranteed – and this is the case as long as he sticks to writing "literature" – the author is more than willing to speak his mind:

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22 "In literatuur wil ik het discours houden waarbij ik velerlei stemmen en denkwijzen een kans geef door ze tegen elkaar uit te spelen. In een essay moet je partij kiezen, je zet je vast in een polarisatie". Cited in Arjan Peters, "Ik zeg liever op papier dat man en vrouw gelijk zijn" (2004). From Benali's use of the word "essay" in this quote, we can deduce that he means "op-ed" – or possibly even pamphlet – rather than the kind of text that is normally designated with the term and in which – in line with the French word 'essayer' from which the generic indication is derived – several different possibilities and positions are often explored.

23 "We leven in gepolariseerde tijden en de vraag ligt voor de hand: bij wie hoor ik? Er wordt altijd aan me getrokken, zowel door de Marokkaanse achterban als door de… laten we hen de Amsterdamse libertijnen noemen. […] Ik schaam mij ervoor dat ik als munitie gebruikt word […] Als schrijver moet je zelfstandigheid bewaren". Cited in Arjan Visser, "Ik moest wachten" (2003).

> Luckily, literature satisfies these longings [to speak his mind about social issues] and obsessions [about feelings of discrimination among Moroccans and "the a*utochtonous* Dutch" who act "as if all newcomers are little green men"], because it is a refuge that offers me the space to speak out politically, on my own conditions, without the bitter aftertaste of having been used.[24]

This conception of literature as a "refuge" fits well with the notion that literature offers an escape to both the pressure from the Moroccan minority that Benali belongs to as well as the "identity industry" of Dutch society:

> Everybody has an opinion about my present and my past, *others have devised an identity for me*. I will always be a Moroccan to the Dutch and a Dutchman to Moroccans. But *part of my identity lies in the future, which I can mimic in literature*.[25]

Here, literature is not only a "refuge", but becomes a kind of utopia in which an "identity" of "the future" can take shape – an identity which the author can devise himself, *beyond* categories such as "Dutch" or "Moroccan". As said earlier, Benali manages to have his cake and eat it. On the one hand, he ties in with a notion of literature that was heard often at the time, in which descent and identity are irrelevant when it comes to literary value. On the other hand, he does explicitly place his work in a context of identity and his Moroccan background.

However, that Moroccan background functions as something from which Benali has to break free, especially in the beginning of his writing career. He repeatedly claims that literature offers the possibility of emancipation from a descent that only consists of stories that "others have made up". In a 1997 article, Benali writes about a piece of "advice [written] for Minister of the Interior Dijkstal" that had been published in the science supplement of a national newspaper. Benali wrote that this advice was based on research that claimed to show that "Moroccan children end up as criminals relatively more often than their

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24 "De literatuur komt gelukkig aan al die verlangens [zich uit te spreken over maatschappelijke ontwikkelingen] en obsessies [over gevoelens van discriminatie bij Marokkanen en "autochtone Nederlanders" die doen "alsof alle nieuwkomers marsmannetjes zijn"] tegemoet, want dat is een vrijplaats die me de ruimte geeft om me politiek uit te spreken, op mijn eigen voorwaarden, zonder dat ik achteraf het bittere gevoel heb dat ik gebruikt ben". Cited in Emma Brunt, "schrijven is vaak een schitterend ongeluk" (2005).

25 "Over mijn heden en verleden heeft iedereen een mening, anderen hebben een identiteit voor mij verzonnen. Ik blijf een Marokkaan voor Nederlanders en een Nederlander voor Marokkanen. Maar een deel van mijn identiteit ligt in de toekomst, die kan ik in literatuur nabootsen". Geciteerd in Iris Pronk, "Ze hopen dat ik schrijf over vliegende tapijten" (2005). Italics added.

Dutch peers", because "Moroccan mothers are poor cooks".[26] Benali draws a parallel with a recently published "book [...] containing stories and poetry by Moroccan-Dutch authors":

> [A]re we dealing with authors whose mothers overcook their vegetables? [In that case] this cooking behaviour may be unhealthy, but it certainly is good for the literary gene. [...] But that's not how it is. The contributions contradict the overcooking-the-vegetables thesis. [...] The stories and poetry [...] speak of an urge to create clarity [...] by writing down one's own story.[27]

In other words, there is no place in literature for reducing people to their descent. Actually, by "writing down one's own story", authors can escape precisely this reduction.

Yet, authors may choose – to stimulate their sales figures or create interest for their work or personality – to feign a certain 'authenticity' for their literary work. When an interviewer asks Benali whether he "grew up with fairy tales", he answers:

> That's the fable of an oral narrative tradition [...]. I have been deliberating: should I make this fable disappear or not? Maybe I shouldn't, because it's very good for me. It gives me a certain aureole: this man stems from an oral narrative tradition, he has a sort of layman's erudition, he has so many stories in his head. But it isn't correct, it's a myth that people are being raised with the *Arabian Nights* or the stories of Nouredin or very large family stories.[28]

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26 "Het verhaal gaat dat Marokkaanse moeders slecht kunnen koken [...]. Dit verklaart meteen waarom Marokkaanse kinderen relatief vaker tot criminaliteit vervallend dan hun leeftijdsgenoten [...]; ik trof deze informatie aan in de wetenschapsbijlage van het NRC van 21 juni 1997. [Dit werd] als advies verkocht aan minister Dijkstal van Binnenlandse Zaken". Abdelkader Benali, "Koken en dichten op z'n Marokkaans" (1997).

27 "[E]en boekje [...] gevuld met verhalen en gedichten van Marokkaans-Nederlandse auteurs. [...] [G]aat het hier om schrijvers wier moeders groenten doorkoken? [Dan] heeft dit kookgedrag weliswaar een slechte invloed op de gezondheid, maar dan toch zeker ook een goede op het literaire gen. […] Maar zo ligt dat niet. De bijdragen weerleggen stuk voor stuk de doorkook-these. […] Uit de verhalen en gedichten […] komt de drang naar voren tot het scheppen van duidelijkheid […] door het eigen verhaal op te schrijven". Ibidem.

28 "Dat is het fabeltje van de orale verteltraditie […]. Ik heb zitten dubben: moet ik dat fabeltje nu wel of niet uit de wereld helpen. Misschien moet ik het wel niet doen, omdat het heel erg goed voor me is. Het geeft je een soort aureool: deze man komt uit de orale verteltraditie, hij heeft een soort lekeneruditie, hij heeft zoveel verhalen in z'n kop. Maar het klopt niet, het is een mythe dat mensen worden opgevoed met Duizend-en-één nacht of de verhalen van Nouredin of heel grote familieverhalen". Cited in Xandra Schutte, no title (1997).

This pragmatic attitude, in which the author in fact creates an exotic *posture* to seduce an audience is not necessarily limited to the way in which the 'foreign' author presents himself. It can even be extended to the literary work itself. In the review in which Benali rejects the "overcooking-the-vegetables thesis", he says the following: "To be in-between or to transcend cultures amounts to something similar to being smart enough to replace the name Oedipus with Chalid, and knowing that Romeo and Juliet are originally from Persia".[29] An author can also deploy the suggestion of engagement to generate interest for his or her literary work:

> [H]e is supposed to have an opinion about issues like 'Moroccan problem youth' and 'how his book has been received in his own community'. 'They act like I'm related to that community as if it were a political party. After all, I don't have any idea of what the Christian or Jewish community thinks about my book either, do I? But I've said to myself: Abdel, don't clam up, that's not a good tactic. Just push that button and rattle off some commonplaces.' He finds that one has to be aware of one's 'market value'.[30]

With statements like these, Benali presents himself as the typical ironical postmodern writer, who watches in amusement while his 'silly' readers and critics think that his work is 'authentic'. By doing this, he creates a tone of *entre nous*, confiding to the interviewers of quality newspapers and readers of his columns, as it were, that 'we' know why an author may "rattle off some commonplaces" every once and a while, feign a "layman's erudition" and add some *couleur locale* to his stories. The implicit 'wink' has to make clear that for Benali himself – and for anyone who 'knows what really matters in literature' – his stories do not derive their value from this so-called authenticity.

In this perspective, it is no coincidence that Benali mentions classics such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Romeo and Juliet* in his review about the "boiling-too-long thesis". The suggestion is that "Moroccan-Dutch authors" – at least Abdelkader Benali himself – first and foremost strive to write 'Great Literature'. Behind the

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29 "Tussen, of boven twee culturen staan betekent zo iets als zo slim zijn om de naam Oedipus te vervangen door Chalid, en weten dat Romeo en Julia uit Perzië komen". "Koken en dichten op z'n Marokkaans" (1997).

30 "'[H]ij [wordt] geacht een mening te hebben over zaken als "Marokkaanse probleemjongeren' en 'hoe het boek ontvangen is in zijn gemeenschap'. 'Ze doen alsof ik met die gemeenschap verbonden ben als met een politieke partij. Ik weet toch ook niet wat de christelijke of joodse gemeenschap van mijn boek vindt? Maar ik heb tegen mezelf gezegd: Abdel, niet dichtklappen, dat is geen goede tactiek. Zet de knop om en ratel wat gemeenplaatsen af.' Je moet wel je 'marktwaarde' kennen, vindt hij". Paraphrased and cited in Judith Koelemeijer, "'Literatuur moet ernstig zijn, dacht ik toen nog'" (1997).

couleur locale, we may find the same stories as those by any author of name. As if to illustrate this point, Benali 'adapts' two of the most important works from the Dutch post-war canon. In 2005 he writes a review in which he transforms Frans Kellendonk's *Mystical Body* (*Mystiek lichaam*, 1986) into 'migrant literature':

> Imagine: an author of Moroccan descent bases his work on his own family, in which his sister is made pregnant by a shockingly rich hashish-trader from Al Hoceima (Rif). The father is a miser who can be found at the mosque two quarters of the day and on top his headache-suffering wife one quarter of the day. The narrator of the story is a choleric son who wants to do with his Jewish friend what generations before him have done with goats (which explains his Jewish friend's nickname 'the Goat'). A Moroccan in search of love and a venereal disease. At the end of the novel the young man reaches the conclusion that one can live with many things, but not without a large portion of monotheistic norms and values. He says goodbye to his rotten family and decides to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca.[31]

This short sketch of a fictional novel is a 'translation' of the plot of Kellendonk's infamous novel about religion, sexuality, money and family, perceived by many as one of the high points of contemporary Dutch literature. Benali merely replaces the Roman Catholic milieu of the original with a Moroccan, Muslim milieu. Seven years before that, Benali gave an even more famous Dutch novel, Gerard Reve's *The Evenings* (*De avonden*, 1947), a similar treatment. In an article titled "The Evenings explained for extraterrestrials", he wrote about this quintessential Dutch novel about the boring life of an adolescent in the fifties: "Necessities for reading The Evenings: 1) Father (baba) and mother (mama); 2) Blackcurrant wine (glass of mint tea); [...] 5) Sunday afternoons with raindrops hitting the window (macaroni and mosque)".[32] Again the contrast be-

31 "Stel: een schrijver van Marokkaanse afkomst neemt als uitgangspunt zijn eigen familie waarin een zus zwanger is geworden van een puissant rijke hasjhandelaar uit Al Hoceima (Rif). De vader een vrek is die twee kwart van de dag in de moskee zit en een kwart van de dag op zijn aan hoofdpijn lijdende vrouw. De verteller van het verhaal een cholerische zoon is die met een joodse vriend zou willen doen wat generaties voor hem met geiten (vandaar ook de bijnaam van de joodse vriend, de Geit) hebben gedaan. Een Marokkaan op zoek naar liefde en een geslachtsziekte. Aan het einde van de roman komt de jongeman tot de conclusie dat met veel te leven valt, maar dat het zonder een flinke dot monotheïstische normen en waarden niet gaat. Hij neemt afscheid van zijn rotte familie en besluit op bedevaart te gaan naar Mekka". Abdelkader Benali, "Zoekt en gij zult baren" (2005).

32 "Benodigdheden voor het lezen van De Avonden: 1) Vader (baba) en moeder (mama); 2) bessenwijn (glaasje mintthee); […] 5) zondagmiddagen met regendruppels die tegen het raam slaan (macaroni en moskee)". Abdelkader Benali, "De avonden buitenaards verklaard" (1998).

tween Benali and Abdolah is significant. The latter claims that because of his position 'between cultures' he creates a unique kind of literature that is beyond the capacities of "for example, Harry Mulisch".[33] Benali, on the other hand, stresses that a strange culture, however "extraterrestrial" it may seem, does not produce different stories: A Moroccan *The Evenings* or *Mystical Body* would be the same as a Dutch one. This can be linked to Benali's ideal of literature as a "refuge" in which categories such as 'Dutch' and 'Moroccan' and 'Western' and 'Muslim' are no longer relevant. For those who have been blinded by the "identity industry", there is the *couleur locale* that may increase an author's "market value". However, for those who cherish the same literary norms and values as the author, there are stories to be found that are just as good as those by Kellendonk, Reve or the great classics of world literature, according to Benali. In the next chapter, we will see how Bouazza makes a similar division between 'smart' and 'naïve' readers.

Thus, Benali consciously assumes a *posture* of unreliability. Although he claims to wear the mask of an exotic author for pragmatic reasons, he simultaneously presents himself as an author who escapes authenticity and locking himself "in a polarisation". That escape returns as an important theme in his literary work itself. The "identity industry" that he sketches in his contributions to the public debate forms the setting for many of his stories. In Benali's literary work, we can regularly observe how Moroccans and Muslims withdraw into a "parallel world" on the one hand and are confronted, on the other hand, with a coerced authenticity when they meet the Dutch. In the following analysis of Benali's oeuvre, I will discuss how the contradiction between "inside" and "outside" plays a large role in his texts − just as the urge to formulate one's own story does. Does Benali truly succeed in writing about these themes without taking a stand? Do the borders that, as the author claims, dominate our contemporary societies, truly blur in his novels, short stories and plays? In other words, can Benali's work indeed be seen as a "refuge"?

4. Withdrawal and trespassing in Benali's work

The setting of Abdelkader Benali's stories about encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims is characterised by strict borders. It is implied that those who want to trespass those borders, have to possess autonomy and a fluid identity. The only way to obtain these is by means of lying, acting or fantasising. At the same time, the development of the plot clearly shows that fluidity and independence come with an inevitable confrontation with laws and borders. A good ex-

33 Cf. the last chapter, p. 50.

ample of this can be found in *Morocco through Dutch eyes 1605-2005*. One of the fictional 'self-portraits' in this work deals with Jan Willem Baron van Ripperda. The historical Van Ripperda was an eighteenth century "diplomat/adventurer" about whom circulated the wildest rumours: he supposedly had an affair with the mother of the Moroccan sultan, converted to Islam, founded his own little kingdom and became the leader of a religious sect.[34] Benali clearly feels drawn to Van Ripperda's life story, about which his co-author Herman Obdeijn remarks that "Wahrheit und Dichtung are difficult to discern".[35]

Benali uses this to create an enigmatic character that exists because of the suggestion that truth can become a lie and vice versa. He presents Van Ripperda as a sympathetic picaroon who cheerfully 'switches' back and forth between cultures. Without much effort he adopts another religion and even another name:

> Mijn overgang naar de islam […] heb ik niet anders gezien dan als een consequente voortzetting van mijn denken en doen. […] Als moslim ging ik dan maar door het leven, zonder me veel aan te trekken van hun Allah […]. Men begon mij Osman te noemen. Noem mij maar Osman. Het is normaal dat men in den vreemde een andere naam aanneemt als teken van goede wil.[36]
>
> I did not perceive [...] my transition to Islam as anything else than a consistent continuation of my worldview and behaviour. [...] So, I went through life as a Muslim, without minding their Allah very much [...]. People started to call me Osman. Call me Osman. It is to be expected that one assumes another name when abroad, as a sign of good will.

The Baron Van Ripperda in Benali's fictional portrait is, in other words, consistent in being consistent. His life as Osman, the Muslim who does not mind Allah very much, testifies of an identity that is formed by change and opportunism. The portrait is explicitly inconsistent: at first, all kinds of serious, theological reasons are given for Van Ripperda's conversion to the Muslim religion (Benali lets him claim, for instance, that the Christian trinity stirred too much doubt in him, doubt which was taken away by Islam); in the end, however, it seems like all of this is more like a game to him, a "religious musical chairs".[37] Benali contrasts this attitude with the implied rigidness of Van Ripperda's narrative audience (the bourgeois at home?), to whom he says:

> mijn ruimharigheid was groter dan de marges strikt toestonden. […] Deze bekering roept bij velen vragen op. Als ik nou zeg dat het hart zijn eigen wetten en regels

34 Abdelkader Benali & Herman Obdeijn, *Marokko door Nederlandse ogen 1605-2005* (2005): 102-103.

35 Ibidem: 103.

36 Ibidem.

37 "Deze stoelendans der godsdiensten". Ibidem.

> stelt, gelooft u me dan? Zo ja, beter voor u en voor mij. Zo nee, laat dan alles hiermee gezegd zijn.[38]
>
> the broadness of my heart was larger than the margins strictly allowed. [...] This conversion has been questioned by many. Well, if I were to say that the heart dictates its own laws and rules, would you believe me? If so, all the better for you and me. If not, then I'll say no more about it.

The appeal is clear and corresponds to Benali's social outlook: those who believe that the "margins" should be dealt with leniently are better off than those who refuse to accept this.

In the end, it is amidst the confusion between truth and non-truth that Van Ripperda finds his kingdom: "Everything about me is a lie, as rumour has it. However, those who have always spoken the truth about me have choked on their own lies, while I, on the other hand, have conquered all slander by founding my own kingdom".[39] This is a kingdom in which the "slander" transforms into "truth" and "the heart dictates its own laws and rules": according to Benali, Van Ripperda creates the same kind of "refuge" of the inauthentic as the one that literature offers to those who want to escape the "identity industry".

In the following paragraphs I will discuss how similar themes run through the rest of Benali's literary work. The author's debut, *Wedding by the Sea* (1996), the Christmas story *Christmas in Oostende* (*Kerstmis in Oostende*, 1999), the theatre texts *The Unfortunate One* (1999) and *Yasser* (2001) and the short story "Of the Father and the Son" will all be reviewed in passing. More extensive attention will be given to two works in which the confrontation between the Islamic and non-Islamic plays a central role: Benali's second novel *The Long Awaited* (2002) and the theatre play *Unclean*. As said, *The Long Awaited* has an unborn child narrating her family histories. She recounts how her grandparents Driss and Malika migrated to the Netherlands; how their son, Mehdi, becomes enchanted by imam Sidi Mansoer, but refuses to be won over by him; how Mehdi's girlfriend, Diana, becomes pregnant when they are only seventeen; and how this stirs great unrest among both families, not in the least because Mehdi is Moroccan and Diana is Dutch. It is a magical realist story full of larger-than-life characters and is set in multicultural Rotterdam where it is difficult for a person to find space for themselves. In the theatre text *Unclean*, a father orders his son to buy an electronic alarm system. Instead, the son returns with a dog. Dogs are unclean animals, according to Muslim law, and therefore

38 Ibidem.

39 "Alles aan mij is gelogen, zo gaat de mare. Zij echter die altijd over mij de waarheid spraken, zijn uiteindelijk in hun eigen leugens gestikt, terwijl ik daarentegen de laster heb overwonnen door mijn eigen koninkrijk te stichten […]".

have no place in the Islamic "kingdom" that the father has founded in his own apartment. The dog himself has a lowly, prejudiced opinion of Muslims. *Unclean* is a tragicomedy: the characters are ridiculous caricatures of Muslim fundamentalism and Dutch islamophobic drivel, but they also become more and more pitiful as the story progresses, and the play ends with an outburst of violence.

In Section 4.1., I will discuss how the margins of the Islamic and the non-Islamic are guarded by several laughable Muslim and Dutch characters in these texts, characters who firmly deny that "the heart dictates its own laws and rules". They show exactly the kind of thinking that Benali dismisses in interviews and op-eds. On the one side, there are Muslim 'border guards'. They have withdrawn within hermetically closed spaces that symbolise Islam's rigid world view. Their Dutch counterparts are xenophobes with the tendency to force a certain identity upon the Muslim 'Other'. Thus, essentialist and exclusivist discourses are deconstructed from within, by stretching them *ad absurdum* in these characters.

In a 2005 interview, Benali claims to be "a kind of ventriloquist".[40] This notion corresponds with the author's comment, quoted above, that he wants to include "various voices and mentalities" and give them "equal opportunities" in his work. However, Benali's ventriloquising is not neutral. Many of his characters function as ironic representations of different social voices. In her study on irony, *Irony's Edge*, Linda Hutcheon has noted how such representations always have an "evaluative edge": the represented is being judged because an ironic representation "manages to provoke emotional responses in those who 'get' it and those who don't, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its 'victims'". In Benali's texts, the ironic representations of Dutch xenophobia and the Muslim fear of the non-Muslim create a bond between the author and his reader: they form a community who 'get' the irony, at the expense of the discourses that are being 'exposed' by being caricatured. This 'exposure' is what Hutcheon calls "the 'critical' dimension" of ironic forms of speech.[41] It is precisely this critical dimension of Benali's irony that undermines the author's claim that he represents different worldviews without taking a stand. If they are given equal opportunities in any way, it is because a certain empathy with his characters is created through the way that his stories develop.

Next I will discuss in Section 4.2.1. how these border guards are confronted with characters that trespass the "margins" and daringly attempt to tell their

40 "[E]en soort buikspreker". Cited in Iris Pronk, "Ze hopen dat ik schrijf over vliegende tapijten" (2005).

41 Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* (1994): 2-6.

"own story", even if it means that the 'official' truth has to be modified. For these characters, the Islamic and non-Islamic are merely elements that can be freely mixed, or masks that can be worn and taken off as need be. In this, they correspond to Benali's Van Ripperda. However, there is an important difference between this sympathetic picaroon and the young men of Muslim descent that embody the main characters in most of Benali's stories published between 1990 and 2005: the latter are too emotionally involved in the clash between 'the Muslim world' and 'the West' to deal with it as playfully as Baron Van Ripperda. In my analysis of these characters, I will discuss how they differ from the classic literary picaroons. It is precisely this difference that makes clear why the "depraved borderland" in Benali's literary work cannot simply be the cheerful hybrid that he presents as the solution for the clash of cultures in his contributions to the public debate.

It is remarkable to notice that Benali's stories neatly correspond to common expectations of 'migrant literature', with their search for "new signs of identity"[42] – despite the author's resistance to the notion that he writes such literature. His stories read as an illustration of Homi K. Bhabha's remark that

> there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà – here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth.[43]

In sections 4.2.2. and 4.2.3. I will discuss how, unlike in many of the works that Bhabha analyses in his seminal *Locations of Culture*, the aim in Benali's work is not to be both "here" and "there" at the same time. At first, his novels, short stories and theatre texts might give this impression through their form and themes. After all, a "gurgling melting pot of styles",[44] as his work has been aptly characterised, is precisely the kind of hybrid that society needs so badly, according to Benali. However, the author makes it clear that this hybrid is only possible in the safe shelter of an autonomous literature. That is to say, one has to move outside, or beyond society. This can also be discerned in the way the plots of his stories develop, where the final goal is to end up *beyond* "here" and "there". Withdrawal is contrasted with an attitude that can best be described as *backing out*: not to take a stand, not to choose sides. However, this is never a definitive solution in Benali's stories, precisely because of the utopian character of this "beyond" – which immediately problematises Benali's own notion of the literary "refuge": the cultures will continue to clash *outside* this "refuge".

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42 See the last chapter, p. 46.

43 Homi K. Bhabha, *Locations of culture* (1994): 1.

44 Hans Goedkoop, "Een borrelende smeltkroes van stijlen" (1996).

4.1. Border guards

Benali's short stories, novels and theatre plays read like a literary freak show in which communities and worldviews are personified by caricatured, grotesque or plainly bizarre characters. Benali has them speaking and thinking in easily and less easily recognisable discourses. The method he uses is a good example of the "negotiation" mentioned in Chapter 2. As explained there, every literary representation is a negotiation, or a contribution to a 'dialogue' about what is represented and the way in which it is represented. A representation results from a semiotic transformation in which the original meaning of the represented is confirmed, undermined or elaborated.[45] Benali chooses mainly to undermine. He includes echoes of extreme ideas, such as xenophobia or fundamentalism, in his work and has these ideas rendering themselves harmless: fathers who take literally the fundamentalist Muslim call to avoid anything 'unclean' rather literally and to found a private kingdom in their house or mosque, which is then closed off from the world outside; a dog that talks in one-liners that read like parodies of the rhetoric of populist politician Pim Fortuyn; and Dutch xenophobes whose ideology is an amalgam of children's songs, populist drivel and fairy tales. In *Poems for the Summer*, his first collection of poetry, Benali has a Turk saying: "You should take fundamentalists//With a pinch of salt, they do so themselves/As well".[46] In this section I will show that a similar attitude can be found in Benali's work: in the slipstream of 9/11 and the heated public debate about Islam that followed, the author reduces the 'clash of civilisations' to a meeting of burlesque caricatures.

4.1.1. Muslim border guards: "say no"

The foremost target of Benali's irony is the distinction in Islam between *halal* and *haram* (that which is allowed and that which is banned according to Muslim law). In his work, Muslims have an exaggerated fear of everything that comes from "outside": the Muslim law does not apply "outside", so everything there is *haram* and must be kept at distance. Characteristic for the discourse of these Muslim characters is the stress they place on a "pure" life – which according to Muslim law means free from outside influences – in which the believer avoids all contact with anything "unclean". At the same time the author deconstructs these discourses from the inside by interpreting them literally or hyperbolically. Westerners are not like unclean dogs, but are depicted as speaking dogs. Spiritu-

45 As Jürgen Pieters has put it so well. Cf. chapter 2, p. 38.

46 "De fundamentalisten moet je met//Een korreltje zout nemen, zij doen dat zelf/Ook". Abdelkader Benali, *Gedichten voor de zomer* (2003): 46.

al purity becomes a physical seclusion from the outside world, with believers trying desperately to keep the door of their house or mosque tightly locked. That physical seclusion is a driving force in the plot and plays an important role in the dynamics of 'border control' versus border trespassing.

The aim of these stories is not, as in Abdolah's stories, to give insight into the pain and confusion of the migrant who has literally and figuratively trespassed borders, been forced to leave behind a tradition and now finds himself in a country that is hostile towards the Islamic. Actually, Benali ridicules that whole separation of Islamic (country of origin) and non-Islamic (the Netherlands), including the assumption that staying in the Netherlands automatically means trespassing Muslim law. "Holland is *haram*", shouts the Moroccan father in Benali's debut, *Wedding by the Sea*, adding: "You won't believe what they gave us to eat when I first came here. Pork! Every evening they stuffed us full of pork. I had pork coming out of my ears!"[47] Without differentiating, the father bans anything that is Dutch, while the threefold repetition of the word "pork" gives his rant a hysterical tone.

Benali's stories also aim to provide an insight into the background of this hysterical fear of the non-Islamic. While it is ridiculed in language and *mise en scène*, the plot testifies of a certain empathy with first generation migrants for whom a withdrawal provides certainty in a Dutch society where all other certainties have disappeared. His work never reads as a dogged attack on the religion of his youth. His style is simply too burlesque for that. In a 2003 interview, Benali says about an infamous remark made by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, one of the Netherlands' foremost critics of Islam: "If you have the need to do so, by all means, go ahead and say that Mohammed is a perverse tyrant, but I myself have no need to react in that way".[48] I would say that despite this comment, Benali's work can be seen as a reaction against the religion of his youth: his stories deal with the seclusion from the outside world that, as Benali himself has said, characterised his youth. However, he indeed does so in a significantly different way than Hirsi Ali. His short stories, novels and theatre texts mainly present Islam as a religion of absurd bans and neuroses. The hyperbole dominates and bizarre exaggerations are used to represent the way in which Muslims deal with the non-Islamic. Young Muslims fear that they will swallow a small crumb of pork if they kiss a Dutch girl, which may lead to them growing a pig's tail.[49] A re-

47 Abdelkader Benali, *Wedding by the Sea* (2000): 33.

48 "Als je daar behoefte aan hebt, mag je van mij zeggen dat Mohammed een perverse tiran was, maar ik heb zelf niet de behoefte om mij op die manier af te zetten". Cited in Arjan Visser, "Ik moest wachten" (2003).

49 Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 265-266.

cently converted car salesman sells "100 hundred per cent halal cars"[50] and dreams of "a window that uses a LCD-display to detect everything that isn't in line with the rules of the faith [...] and then eliminates it, deletes it with a black bar".[51] A Moroccan family has migrated to the Belgian coastal town of Oostende, but has never seen the sea because its members do not dare to leave their house, which they have made into a bulwark of the Muslim faith.[52] Benali's work is full of these over-the-top situations and metaphors that are taken literally.

In the rest of this subsection, I will discuss two of the most striking examples of Muslim seclusion from the outside world found in Benali's texts: Sidi Mansoer, the imam and Koran school teacher of the Grey Mosque in *The Long Awaited* and the father in the theatre piece *Unclean*, whose name is also Mansoer. Both characters fulfil the same role. In both *The Long Awaited* and *Unclean*, Islam is linked to withdrawal and a disgust of the West. In what James Phelan has called the thematic sphere of meaning (as described in Chapter 2 of this study), both Mansoers function as personifications of the borders between the Islamic and the non-Islamic, which they never cross. In the mimetic sphere of meaning, they function as the most important obstacle for the sons who want to trespass across those borders. In the synthetic sphere of meaning, the caricatured nature of these characters ridicules the worldview that attributes such a central role to these borders. First I will discuss the discourse of both characters, which echo recognisable and less recognisable fundamentalist and Islamist voices from the Netherlands and beyond.[53] Time and again, the Islamist requirement to live a "pure" Islamic existence returns in the thoughts, words and acts of these characters. The two Mansoers are characterised as busy border guards, caught in a droll battle with baneful outside influences. This battle seems to take place in their head rather than anywhere else and receives a tragic dimension when it becomes clear that their frenetic rejection of the "outside" testifies of a minority complex: the Netherlands has to be locked out because there is no place in its society for them.

Next, I will analyse the plot of these stories. Both *The Long Awaited* and *Unclean* can be seen as attempts to provide an answer to the (ethical) question of

50 "[H]onderd procent halal auto's". Ibidem: 151.

51 "een ruit die via een LCD-scherm alles detecteerde wat zich niet aan de spelregels van het geloof hield […] en dat elimineerde, negeerde met een zwart vakje". Ibidem.

52 Abdelkader Benali, *Kerstmis in Oostende* (1999): passim.

53 'Islamism' refers to several ideological interpretations of Islam in which striving for an introduction of Muslim law is the central issue, that stress a person must resists non-Islamic influences, and that often testify of notions of Islamic superiority. Cf. Graham E. Fuller, Islamists in the Arab World: The Dance Around Democracy (2004): passim.

how to live a good life in what Bhabha has called "'in-between' spaces". That question is specified in these texts as: who should you be, what identity should you develop in order to neutralise the clash of civilisations in which you find yourself? The Mansoers represent a possible answer to this question, namely to fully restrict oneself to one of the two clashing cultures. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that this is the answer of frightened men. In the end, their withdrawal leads to an identity that is too unstable to be maintained (*The Long Awaited*) or has to be defended with violence (*Unclean*).

Towards the end of *The Long Awaited* we read how a concerned stepfather, Rob Knuvelder, decides to visit the Grey Mosque in Rotterdam. His stepdaughter, Diana, has been made pregnant by Mehdi, her Moroccan boyfriend. Rob wants the imam to give a "judiciary provision", also known as a "fatwa", on the matter. This imam is Sidi Mansoer, and the word "fatwa" (a term that will call forth images of Muslim fundamentalism for most Western readers, because of ayatollah Khomeini's infamous fatwa on Salman Rushdie in 1989[54]) links this character to the real-life imam El Moumni, whom I mentioned in the introduction.[55] At the time that this novel was published, El Moumni was "the only Moroccan imam in the Netherlands with the right to pronounce fatwas".[56] The text also includes other subtle and not-so-subtle hints that strengthen this link. El Moumni is, for example, the imam of the An Nasr mosque in Rotterdam, which is a converted church just like Sidi Mansoer's Grey Mosque. This is the case for many mosques in the Netherlands, however, these real-life and fictional houses of prayer are linked in an even more specific way. 'An Nasr' is Arabic for 'victory' and is derived from the same root (نصر) as the Arab word 'mansur' (or, in Dutch spelling, 'mansoer'), meaning 'victor'. The link with El Moumni is significant. In 2001, the year before *The Long Awaited* was published, El Moumni had caused turmoil with a sermon in which he claimed that Europeans were "lowlier than dogs or pigs", because "after all, homosexuality is not found among these animals".[57] Benali has made Sidi Mansoer a parody of El Moumni, which even those who are not familiar with the Arab language or the hierarchy of Moroccan imams in the Netherlands will recognise. Many contemporary

54 Because of this event many people have come to see the term 'fatwa' as meaning the same as the contents of Khomeini's provision – a death penalty. Cf. Abdulwahid van Bommel, "Fatwa" (1996): 32-35.

55 See the introduction, page 10.

56 "[El Moumni is] de enige Marokkaanse imam in Nederland die het recht heeft fatwa's uit te vaardigen". Bas Mesters & Henk Muller, "Een Hollandse imam" (2000).

57 "[L]ager dan honden of varkens"; "Homoseksualiteit komt bij deze beesten immers niet voor". Cited in Harm Botje & Ali Lazrak, "Het gitzwarte verleden van Khalil el Moumni" (2001).

readers will have recognised in Sidi Mansoer the Moroccan imam that, at the time, functioned in the public debate as the personification of all that was supposed to be wrong with the Muslim community in the Netherlands and the failed integration of its members. More than his ideas about homosexuality, Benali seems to ridicule El Moumni's plea that "God [may] protect Muslims against these pernicious practices".[58] It is this wish to be shielded against "pernicious practices" that seems to guide El Moumni, as it returns several times in his public statements. He says, for instance, in an interview: "When one enters the [An Nasr] mosque, one does not at all feel that one is in a country of unbelievers".[59] Elsewhere, El Moumni stresses the importance of preventing mixing an Islamic existence and West lifestyle: "There is no such thing as a Dutch Islam and there won't even be", he claims. And he adds:

> Whenever there is a conflict between the norms of the West and those of Islam, the believer must choose Islam. Islam will always remain stronger than the seductions of society or man's desires. The nature of Muslims is different than that of the Westerner.[60]

In that last sentence, we recognise the essentialism that Benali rebuked in his op-eds. Thus, El Moumni is an obvious target for him. In Sidi Mansoer's words, El Moumni's comments are enlarged to the point of ridiculousness:

> De zogenaamde Grote Ideeën en Lichtzinnige Overtuigingen hebben onze geestelijke honger geprobeerd te stillen met televisie, koelkasten en broodroosters, ze hebben geprobeerd, de blinde, dwarse krachten, een doek te leggen over de chaos die ze niet konden controleren, waarvan ze de feiten niet onder ogen wilden zien en ons die doek aan te bieden, ons te vragen daarin te delen, maar toen puntje bij paaltje kwam waren we toch nog het meest tevreden met wat Allah ons allang heeft gegeven.
>
> The so-called Great Ideas and Loose Beliefs have attempted to satisfy our spiritual hunger with television, fridges and toasters, they have tried, the blind, intractable forces, to place a cloth over the chaos they couldn't control, the facts of which they

58 "Moge God de moslims tegen deze verderfelijke praktijken beschermen". Cited in Harm Botje & Ali Lazrak, "Het gitzwarte verleden van Khalil el Moumni" (2001).

59 "Als je de moskee binnenkomt heb je helemaal niet het gevoel dat je in een ongelovig land bent". Ibidem.

60 "Als er een conflict is tussen de normen van het Westen en die van de islam moet de gelovige voor de islam kiezen. De islam blijft altijd sterker dan de verleidingen van de maatschappij of de wensen van de mens. De natuur van de moslims is anders dan die van de westerling". Cited in Bas Mesters & Henk Muller, "Een Hollandse islam" (2000).

> would not face, and offer us that cloth, to ask us to partake in it, but when it came to the crunch, we were still most content with what Allah gave us long ago.[61]

The exaggerated, inflated tone can be read as an indirect characterisation of Sidi Mansour: a pompous character who likes to give those who visit his mosque the impression that he knows right from wrong – but who tends to get lost in his own words. In this passage, we can recognise El Moumni's claim that the "the believer must choose Islam". This claim is ridiculed by being phrased in the character's solemn style in which even "toasters" are part of a Western conspiracy to turn Muslims away from their religion.

El Moumni's experience of his mosque as closed off to the outside "land of unbelievers" is also found in Sidi Mansour, when we read that in the Grey Mosque "the wooden door [...] is left ajar and the evil outside air enters with the draught ('we can't help it, *sidi*, the door simply won't close, none of our brothers has found a solution yet...')".[62] We have already seen the figure of the Dutch wind as a *pars pro toto* for the Netherlands as a threat to an Islamic identity in the short story "Fagrimoloek" by Kader Abdolah, in which a veiled woman has the feeling that the Dutch wind wants to tear away her veil. The difference is, however, that in Benali's text there is no pathos – just irony.

In *The Long Awaited*, the closing off from the outside world is an important theme. In the play *Unclean* it has an even more central role. The Mansoer in this text lives in a "shabby apartment in a Dutch working-class neighbourhood", which he continuously calls his "kingdom". Here, his "tongue" dictates the law and his son is the "heir to the throne" and must "say no to all that doesn't belong in the kingdom".[63] Time and again, Benali has his characters deny everything that does not correspondents to their own religion and culture. The way in which he does this testifies of a familiarity with Islamism that goes beyond a little knowledge of the words of an infamous Dutch imam. In *The Long Awaited* and especially *Unclean*, numerous references to the ideas of Sayyid Qutb can be found. Qutb is one of the most prominent ideologues of modern islamist thought. It is not strange that echoes of the work of this influential twentieth century Egyptian philosopher can be found so abundantly in the discourse of both of the Mansoers. In Qutb's thinking, we find a call to all Muslims to do away with all non-Islamic influences, to move away from countries that do not

61 Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2001): 38-39. The chapter from which this quote is taken has been removed in the tenth, revised edition.

62 "[D]e houten deur die op een kier staat en de boze buitenlucht in stroompjes binnenlaat ('we kunnen er niks aan doen, sidi, de deur laat niet toe dat hij helemaal dicht kan, geen van onze broeders heeft nog een oplossing gevonden…')". Ibidem: 106. The chapter from which this quote is taken, has been removed in the tenth, revised edition.

63 Abdelkader Benali, *Onrein* (2003): passim.

observe the Muslim law, and to return to a pure, Islamic source. Thus, his world view encompasses all that is wrong with the Muslim community, according to Benali: withdrawal and essentialism.

One of the central themes in Qutb's work is a strict separation between the Islamic and the non-Islamic: he divides the world into dâr al-islâm (the house of Islam, or peace) on the one hand and *dâr al-harb* (the house of war) on the other.[64] Qutb uses the term 'house of war' to refer to those countries where there is no Muslim sovereignty, that is, any place where the Muslim law (*shari'a*) is not enforced. According to Qutb, a true community of Muslims can retain its purity only by migrating from the house of war to a pure Islamic existence. Qutb uses the term *hijra* for this migration, which is presented as the duty of every true Muslim. In Islamic history, the *hijra* is first and foremost the migration of the prophet Mohammed to Medina. Here Mohammed founded the first – and in the eyes of Islamists the only true – Muslim community from which Mecca was conquered and subsequently purified. Qutb claims that just as Mohammed moved away from sinful Mecca, the believer must withdraw from the house of war.

This *hijra* need not necessarily be a physical migration, according to Qutb and his followers. One can also withdraw within, for example, an apartment[65] or even within oneself: a so-called "inner *hijra*". What matters most, Qutb writes in his most important work, *Milestones*, is that the believers

> remove [themselves] from all the influences of the Jahiliyyah [literally: ignorance. With this term, Qutb refers to the godless society in which life is not dictated by Islamic law] in which we live and from which we derive benefits. We must return to that pure source [The Koran] [...] which is free from any mixing or pollution. [...] From it we must also derive our concepts of life, our principles of government, politics, economics and all other aspects of life.

This inner *hijra* is not an aim in itself. After "the early stages of our training" in which Muslims rid themselves of "all mixing and pollution", the time comes to

64 The terms themselves are not Qutb's own, but have a long history in Islamic thought on relationships with the non-Islamic world, although the more neutral term dâr al-kufr (house of unbelief) is sometimes used instead of dâr al-harb. Cf. M. Djalili, "Dâr al-Islâm" (2001): 338; M. Djalili, "Dâr al-harb" (2001): 337.

65 One of the most spectacular examples of this was the Egyptian group al-Jamâ'a al-Takfîr wa al-Hidjra (literally: 'the group of declaring apostasy and migration'). In the 1970s, members of this radical splinter of the Muslim Brotherhood (of which Qutb himself was a member) withdrew into apartments in Cairo and into the mountains around al-Minya (Egypt). After they kidnapped an Egyptian minister, they were violently persecuted by the government. Johannes J.G. Jansen, "Takfîr wa al-hijra, jamâ'at al-" (2002): 179-180.

change the outside world: "Our aim is to first change ourselves so that we may later change the society".[66]

The similarities between these passages from the work of Qutb and Sidi Mansour's speech on the "so-called Great Ideas and Loose Beliefs" are remarkable. Elsewhere in *The Long Awaited*, the Grey Mosque is explicitly related to the notion of *hijra* as a return to Mohammed's original Islamic community, which plays such a central role in Qutb's philosophy. This happens when a flashback describes how the original church building is turned into a mosque by the Rotterdam Muslim communitiy:

> Toen de mensen van de gemeente kwamen kijken […] begrepen ze niet dat deze mannen met een vuur in de ogen werkten, dat ze de toekijkers geen blik gunden, want *ze voelden zich even als in Medina*, nieuwe gelovigen die eropuit getrokken waren *in een dwaze hizjra*".
>
> When the people of the municipality came to have a look [...] they didn't understand that these men were working with a fire in their eyes, that they didn't deign to look at the onlookers, because for a moment they felt *as if they were in Medina*, new believers *out on a foolish hijra*".[67]

In *Unclean*, the echoes of Qutb's work are almost *ad verbum*. The father says, for example, about his life in the Netherlands: "Slowly one rots away in the *house of war* that is this country".[68] Just as Qutb admonishes Muslims to let their life be dictated by a "pure source", this father Mansoer sets clear limits to his "kingdom". As he tells his son:

> En toch is er een grens. Alboekhari en Galalain zijn daar heel duidelijk over. Ze baseren zich op de Koran en de overlevering van de profeet, vrede zij met Hem. De troonopvolger moet weten wat de grenzen zijn – zonder grenzen is hij ten dode opgeschreven.
>
> And yet, a line needs to be drawn. [Muslim authorities] Albukhari and Jalalayn are very clear on this. They base themselves on the Koran and the traditions of the prophet, peace be upon Him. The heir to the thrown must know the limits – without borders he is doomed to death.[69]

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66 Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (2005): 7-8.

67 Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 45, italics added. The chapter from which this quote is taken has been removed in the tenth, revised edition.

68 "Langzaam rot je weg in dit huis van oorlog dat dit land is". Abdelkader Benali, *Onrein* (2003) 13, italics added.

69 Ibidem: 17. Albukhari (Mohammed ibn Ismail al-Bukhârî, 810-970) is one of the most important collectors of ahadîth (sayings and deeds by the prophet Mohammed and his companions that, together with the Koran, form the sources of Muslim law). His work is usually referred to as Sahîh Al-Bukhârî or simply Al-Bukhârî. Jalalayn refers to Tafsîr al-Jalâlayn (or Jalâlayn, which is the plural form of Jalal, meaning its two authors, Jalal

In the Mansoers' separation between "inside" and "outside" and their hysterical fear of the unclean, Qutb's ideas about the purity of Islam and how it is defiled by influences from outside, most notably his notion of the "inner *hijra*", are first introduced and then dismissed. At the beginning of *The Long Awaited*, the narrator announces that she will "have to eliminate" some of her characters "like a sniper" for the sake of her story.[70] The author lets her do this, at times with obvious glee on both her part and his, especially when it comes to characters like the Mansoers. Father Mansoer with his obsessive talk about his "kingdom" while living in a shabby apartment, Sidi Mansoer who refuses "toasters" because he is "content with what Allah gave us long ago" are caricatures of Qutb's "true Muslim", lost in a "foolish hijra".

The strict fathers and their Muslim discourse are, however, not only caricatures in Benali's stories. His texts aim at a certain empathy for these men through the development of the plot in the mimetic sphere of meaning. Certainly, the goal here is not to create understanding for Islamism. However, the reader is invited to feel sympathy for an older generation of Muslims who in the chaos of clashing civilisations have little to hold on to besides a strict separation between "inside" and "outside". We can see this, for instance, in the short story "Of the Father and the Son" ("Van de vader en de zoon") from *Messages from Poppy Seed City* (2001). The main character is the kind of father that is so typical for Benali's work, Omar: a man who wants to prevent his son from coming into contact with "unseemly [...] ideas".[71] Instead, he would prefer to see a strict adherence to the "[p]ure, clear, well-defined, God-given *nishan*", which "lie stocked" in "his head".[72] He is haunted by the fear that the consequences of "that other, chaotic idea"[73] will be disastrous for him: "Complete demasqué. Gone is your tribal honour, gone is the self-respect you acquired".[74] The notion of "tribal honour" archaises the father, as it were: between the video recorders and washing machines that his son surrounds himself with, the father seems lost, which is made worse by the remark that the "[k]nowledge" that he learned in his native

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ad-Din al-Mahalli, 1389-1459 and Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, 1445-1505). This is one of the most authoritative and most read tafâsîr, that is, exegeses or commentaries on the Koran.

70 "[I]k moet [hen] als een feilloze scherpschutter weer uit de weg ruimen". Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 9.

71 "[O]nbetamelijke [...] ideeën". Abdelkader Benali, *Berichten uit Maanzaad Stad* (2001): 122.

72 "[k]lare, duidelijke, vastomlijnde, door God gegeven nishjan", "in zijn hoofd [...] opgeslagen". Ibidem. "nishan" means 'signs'.

73 "[D]at andere, chaotische idee". Ibidem.

74 "Totaal demasqué. Weg stameer, weg verworven zelfrespect". Ibidem.

village is "useless in this world".[75] Similarly, the fundamentalism of father Mansoer and Sidi Mansoer is represented in such a way that it functions first and foremost as an expression of a fear that they might lose their position and status when their sons come into contact with "unseemly [...] ideas". The strict separation between "inside" and "outside" that can be found in Islamism arguably helps them to prevent this. As the novel and the play progress, this fear turns out to be grounded. Sidi Mansoer loses his identity when he finally does come into contact with the outside world, while the theatre play inevitably moves towards a violent confrontation between the Dutch dog and the Muslim father and son.

However, Islamism is ultimately condemned both by the way in which this worldview is ridiculed through language and *mise en scène* and the way in which it is explained by the plot of these stories. Burlesque though they may be (or, rather, thanks to their burlesque nature), Benali's texts can be seen as experiments with identity formation. "Inside" and "outside" are possible sources of identity in the chaotic "'in-between' spaces" in which these stories are set. Characters like the Mansoers illustrate that *only* "inside" is not enough.

This becomes even more evident when we compare the Benali's different stories that deal with the theme of creating one's own kingdom. As said, this theme reflects Benali's ideal of escape and the necessity to gain autonomy in the "'in-between' space". While Baron Van Ripperda's kingdom of the lie represents true autonomy – like every liar, he only recognises his own laws – the kingdom that the Mansoers have created is a perversion of this ideal. The failure of the Mansoers' attempts to create a pure existence is yet another rejection of authenticity. Sidi Mansoer, the imam, is described in *The Long Awaited* as someone who "like a sponge, soaks up all those big words [of Islam] that were given to him for free and that formed epaulets on his soul".[76] The military metaphor suggests power and fighting spirit, but is ultimately ironic: Mansoers "big words" offer no protection whatsoever, nor does the closed-off space of his mosque that physically symbolises them. In *The Long Awaited*, we read that a stone is thrown through the window of the place where Mansoer has "the feeling that he had found, a priori, his time and space".[77] That is to say, the "evil outside air" violently intrudes his purified environment and with that, Mansoer's "big

75 "Kennis die in deze wereld waardeloos was". Ibidem.

76 [Z]oals hij zich als spons volzoog met al die grote woorden [van de islam] die hij gratis en voor niks had gekregen en epauletten vormden op zijn ziel". Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 40. The chapter from which this quote is taken has been removed in the tenth, revised edition.

77 "[H]et gevoel dat hij a priori zijn tijd en ruimte had gevonden". Ibidem: 365.

words" lose their power: "[Mansoer] started to [...] find his own musings weak and washed-out, as if a stone had been thrown through his words as well".[78]

These fundamentalists are not the active, threatening men that we met in Kader Abdolah's stories. Because the military metaphors in the discourse of the Mansoers function as a sign of weakness, the ultimate effect is that the war rhetoric that is so characteristic of Muslim fundamentalism is made impotent. The manliness that the Mansoers attribute to themselves as kings of the closed-off "inside" spaces has no meaning whatsoever in the "outside", just like their "big words" have no meaning "outside". The djellaba, the traditional male Arab dress, becomes a sign of effeminacy in the Netherlands. As Benali has the father in *Unclean* phrasing it:

> Wat is het huis van oorlog? Dat is het land waarin wij leven, waarin wij niet de baas zijn. Waarin de oude wordt nagekeken in zijn soepjurk, waarin hij geen plaats meer heeft, waarin de wrok op zijn huid groeit – waarin ouderen worden tegengehouden door het dictaat van de jeugd!
>
> What is the house of war? That is the country in which we live, where we don't have the upper hand. Where the old man is stared at in his tent dress, where there is no longer a place for him, where the resentment grows on his skin – where the elderly are held back by the diktat of youth![79]

This 'emasculation' of the fathers reminds us of Bolfazl, the narrator of Kader Abdolah's *The Voyage of the Empty Bottles* (*De reis van de lege flessen*, 1997) who had lost the position of the head of the family and was reminded of this by 'the Netherlands' when a dildo was thrown against his window.[80] This is the unmasking, the "[c]omplete demasqué" that the father in "Of the Father and the Son" feared so much: the king has become an old man in a "tent dress". The withdrawal is ultimately contraproductive in Benali's stories, because it creates

78 "[N]u begon hij zijn eigen mijmeringen slap en futloos te vinden, alsof er ook door zijn woorden een steen was gegaan". Ibidem: 363. Strangely enough, the chapter starts with the comment that a firebomb ("brandbom") has been thrown through the window, rather than a stone. It is but one of the many inconsistencies that characterise *The Long Awaited*. Undoubtedly, this has to do with the very poor editing of the text (cf. Abdelkader Benali & Michaël Zeeman, *Wie kan het paradijs weerstaan* (2006): 41, where Benali complains to fellow author and critic Michaël Zeeman that the editing of this novel was "really dreadful" ("bar slecht")). However, the text seems to intentionally have a certain 'muddled' character: it characterises the narrator as rather unreliable (or at least confused) and can be seen as a reflection of the multicultural chaos of its setting, a stylistic strategy that is also used by authors such as Salman Rushdie, whom Benali has often named as an important influence in his work.

79 Abdelkader Benali, *Onrein* (2003): 16.

80 Cf. last chapter, p. 66-67.

a situation in which anything coming from "outside" can threaten the autonomy that is brought about by that withdrawal. Again, the father in *Unclean*:

> De hond is een onrein dier. Hij maakt ons onrein. Wij zijn onreine mensen geworden. En onreine mensen krijgen geen respect. Geen respect is geen veiligheid meer. Geen veiligheid is het einde van de familie Mansoer. Mansoer betekent overwinaar, met een hond in huis ben je geen overwinnaar meer, maar onrein.
>
> The dog is an unclean animal. It makes our house unclean. We have become unclean people. And unclean people get no respect. No respect means no more safety. No safety means the end of the Mansoer family. Mansoer means victor, with a dog in the house we are no longer a victor, but are unclean.[81]

As with the father in *Wedding by the Sea*, who kept repeating the word "pig meat", the repetition of the word "unclean" renders the father hysterical, a sign showing the obsessive fear of this character. Later in the play he will sadly conclude: "now we have become the Losers family".[82] Throughout the play, the presence of the dog turns everything upside down and takes away everything the father has to hold onto: purity, respect, safety, and even the meaning of his name – his identity, one could say.

In *Unclean* this "outside" threat is connected to Qutb's notion that Muslims must Islamise their surroundings following the withdrawal to purify themselves. The identity that has come under pressure from "outside" has to be defended, with violence if need be: "outside" must be made to reflect "inside", so that it is no longer a threat. After the talking dog (a character I will discuss more extensively in the next section) has intruded the father's kingdom, tensions build up. Then we are shown how saying "no" to "all [...] that doesn't belong in the kingdom" will ultimately lead to violence. The son "knocks the living daylights out of" the dog, after which the father says approvingly: "There, you're starting to learn what it's like. My son is willing to become an heir to the throne after all".[83] During the violent climax that follows, the father shouts at the dog:

> Jij neemt de wereld over, jij bent bezig onze harten en zielen te corrumperen. Jij bent onze grootste angst. Maar wij zullen overwinnen. We zullen jullie uit jullie huizen halen, we zullen jullie terugdrijven, we zullen jullie castreren en je het voortplanten onmogelijk maken, we zullen ervoor zorgen dat jullie net zo zijn als wij, maar altijd met het schandteken op het voorhoofd gemetseld. We zullen jullie je klein laten voelen en jullie zullen begrijpen wie hier de baas is.

81 Abdelkader Benali, *Onrein* (2003): 26.

82 "Nu zijn we de familie van Verliezers geworden". Ibidem: 44.

83 "Zo, je begint het te leren. Mijn zoon is toch bereid om een troonopvolger te worden". Ibidem: 55.

> You're taking over the world, you're corrupting our hearts and souls. You're our biggest fear. But we'll be victorious. We'll drag you out of your houses, we'll force you back, we'll castrate you and make it impossible for you to reproduce, we'll make sure that you'll be just like us, but always with a sign of disgrace attached like brickwork onto your forehead. We'll make you feel small and you'll understand who's the boss around here.

The fact that the father addresses the dog with "jullie", i.e. the Dutch second person plural , shows that he is no longer using his words of vicious hatred to just talk to the dog. He is addressing the entire West, the threatening "outside" in its entirety. Despite the absurdity of a talking dog – which literally depicts El Moumni's metaphor of Europeans being "lowlier than dogs or pigs" – and the father's exaggerated language, this passage is characterised by a sense of spite that is rare in Benali's work. The ironic distance with which the whole situation is presented and the father's drollness disappear as the play progresses and the reader is presented with the ultimate consequence of a worldview in which "inside" and "outside" are strictly separate. In this respect, it is striking that after *Unclean*, these themes disappear from Benali's work. Not just in the sense that he deals with other themes in his later work: from the revised tenth edition (2005) onwards, most chapters in which Sidi Mansoer appears have been removed from *The Long Awaited* as well.[84] It is as if all that could be said in literature on this subject has been said with this uncharacteristic outburst of violence, as far as Benali is concerned.

4.1.2. Dutch border guards: a "coercion to choose"

The Islamic border guards have their Dutch counterparts. The first are recognisable as caricatures of the withdrawal within the Muslim community, while the latter are used to ridicule the "coercion to choose" that Benali also attacks in his contributions to the public debate. The Dutch xenophobia is, however, far less sharply and sternly ridiculed than the Islamist fear for all that is unclean. There are no seasoned racists to be found in Benali's work opposite characters such as Sidi Mansoer and father Mansoer, who represent fairly extreme forms of fundamentalism. However, the author does use several easily recognisable *signalling words* in the discourse of the dog in *Unclean* and a Dutch father in *The Long Awaited*, which recall all kinds of social debates surrounding the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands. Here as well, there is an exaggeration *ad adsurdum* with a linguistic play of hyperbole, reversal and caricature. The author dismisses the "identity industry" by staging it in the form of characters who can only talk about Islam and their fear of Muslims in platitudes, clichés and stereo-

84 Cf. the annotation for the previous pages.

types. Thus, just like Islamism, the societal discourses on Islam are referred to *and* shown to be obtuse.

At the time *Unclean* was published, for example, there were regular media hypes around the refusal of fundamentalist Muslims in the Netherlands to shake hands with women. In the theatre play, this is echoed in a scene in which the cheeky dog says to the father: "(holds out his hand). We can at least shake hands, that is, if you've washed them".[85] The dog is presented as a walking cliché of Dutch criticism on Islam. He continuously talks in simplistic one-liners that, as said, remind of the recently murdered populist, anti-Islam politician Pim Fortuyn. One of Fortuyn's most famous lines, "I say what I think and I do what I say", is, for example, turned into an absurd and conceited utterance: "I say what I think and I think what I say and sometimes I don't think at all, but will say something anyway and sometimes I say something without thinking and I still think of myself as a smart dog. I'm not troubled by a lack of self-confidence".[86]

By placing such characters opposite Islamic 'border guards', Benali turns the 'clash of civilisations' into a petty affair: a bragging dog who can't keep Turkey and Morocco apart ("Is Anatolia far from Marrakech? If I'd like to see them both in one day, would that be possible?"[87]) facing a grown man who is a make-believe king. In *The Long Awaited*, the encounter between Diana's stepfather Rob Knuvelder and Sidi Mansoer is another example of this.[88] As said, Knuvelder decides to go to the Grey Mosque to receive a *fatwa* on his daughter's relationship with a Moroccan boy. The representation of Knuvelder's speaking and thinking reads like a list of stereotypical ideas and denigrating utterances on Islam. Knuvelder refers to Muslims with terms such as a "big man with a long beard in a tent dress [...], straight from the desert" and Islam is a "religion with [...] imperialist pretentions, with its claim on eternal justice with

85 "([S]teekt zijn hand uit). We kunnen tenminste handen schudden, als je ze tenminste gewassen hebt". Abdelkader Benali, *Onrein* (2003): 21.

86 "Ik zeg wat ik denk en ik denk wat ik zeg en soms denk ik niets en zeg ik toch iets en soms zeg ik iets zonder dat ik heb nagedacht en vind mezelf nog steeds een slimme hond. Van gebrek aan zelfvertrouwen heb ik geen last". Ibidem: 51.

87 "Is Anatolië ver van Marrakesj? Als ik die twee in één dag wil doen, kan dat dan?" Ibidem: 51.

88 Even his name shows that Knuvelder is a man who likes clear, black-and-white demarcations, as it refers to G.P.M. Knuvelder, a famous scholar of Dutch literature. Knuvelder wrote the Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandse letterkunde, which for a long time was the standard work on Dutch literature. In it, Knuvelder shows the kind of concern with neat divisions in periods, genres and schools that is characteristic of a more old-fashioned approach to literary history.

words of stone that would turn even an alderman to marble".[89] Just like the Mansoers were linked to Islamist discourses, Knuvelder is linked to someone like Samuel Huntington. His *The Clash of Civilizations* can be found under Knuvelder's bed,[90] a book that, as I noted in the introduction to this study, serves as an important carrier of the notion that Islamic and Western civilisations must necessary clash in the Dutch public debate.[91] Rob's visit to the Grey Mosque can be read as an ironic staging of precisely this notion. This is done through the use of language, but also the *mise en scène*. In his mind, Knuvelder is going to the battlefield: he wants to "put a stop to" the sinister plans of "those effeminate shepherds" and Benali has his ex-wife mockingly call him "Richard the Lion-hearted".[92] The passage that describes Rob waiting in the mosque to talk to the imam clearly shows that this battlefield only exists in his mind. Knuvelder's thoughts and those of Sidi Mansoer are represented alternately and while the first thinks he is fighting "stone words", the latter feels "as if a stone had been thrown through his words" – Rob takes something for "marble" that in reality has become "weak and washed-out".

Beside this, characters such as Rob Knuvelder function in the story as a second obstacle for the trespasser of borders. After Mehdi has left the closed-off space of his parental home (the symbolism is laid on thickly when he does so using a door that his parents only ever use "to let in some fresh air"[93]) and left "Sidi Mansoer's commandments"[94] that he should start a relationship with Diana behind him, Mehdi bumps into Rob Knuvelder, who puts "a list of questions in front of him to see what kind of pig we have in the poke [and to] see towards which side his heart beats".[95] This "list" and his stereotypical ideas about Muslims show that Knuvelder can be read as a parody on the "coercion to choose" that according to Benali has Dutch society in its grip. Just like Islamism and the separation between *haram* and *halal*, this coercion and the essentialism and coerced authenticity that go with it are exaggerated until they become absurd. Eve-

89 "grote man met lange baard in soepjurk […], regelrecht uit de woestijn"; "dit geloof met […] imperialistische pretenties, met zijn aanspraak op eeuwige gerechtigheid met stenen woorden die zelfs een ouderling in marmer zouden veranderen". Abdellader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 338, 365.

90 Ibidem: 339.

91 Cf. the introduction, p2 and note 2, in which I explain that identifying Huntington's work with the friction between 'Islam' and 'the West' is not entirely justified.

92 "[D]ie verwijfde schapenhoeders"; "Richard Leeuwenhart". Ibidem: 362, 343.

93 "om wat frisse lucht binnen te laten". Ibidem: 159.

94 "[D]e geboden van Sidi Mansoer". Ibidem: 109.

95 "[I]k [leg] hem een lijst vragen voor om te zien welke kat we in de zak hebben. Ik wil zien welke kant zijn hart op klopt". Ibidem: 339.

ry time Mehdi stands in front of a door in *The Long Awaited*, he meets a Dutchman who reacts almost as hysterically to a Muslim as the Mansoers react to the non-Islamic.

Again, language plays an important role in the way this is done. Take, for example, the meeting between Mehdi and Floris-Jan (the boyfriend of Diana's mother) when Mehdi rings their doorbell in search for Diana. A large part of the remarkably polyphonically composed passage that follows is narrated by Floris-Jan's imaginary friends, who tell the story of the assassination he senses is about to take place. These friends speak in a strange mix of discourses, in which stereotypes, street slang, student-like bragging and fairy tales play leapfrog with each other. This passage starts when Floris-Jan tells Diana's mother who is at the door:

> ''t Is een vreemdeling zeker.' En toen nog een keer. 'Een vreemdeling, niks bijzonders.'
>
> Uit het verzamelde werk van de Borrelaars van het Late Uur: […] Dat was volgens de omstanders, de late vrienden van Floris-Jan, 't begin van het einde, om 't maar mulischiaans te zeggen, of zoals u wilt, la fin, dat gelazer over wel of geen vreemdeling. Hij ondertekende zijn dood met bloed, kreeg een pak op zijn flikker van heb ik jou daar. 't Kan zijn dat ze andere dingen met hem hebben gedaan, dingen die ze in die cultuur lekker vinden, maar waarvan ze 't liefst niet willen weten. Wat 't daglicht niet verdragen kan, weet je wel, weten we niet, weten we wel. In ieder geval: hij werd aangetroffen, gekneveld, als een speenvarken klaar voor de grill. Ontzettend lullig. Floris-Jan had niet alleen de verkeerde houding, dat tot daaraan toe, maar hij wist bovendien plotseling niet meer wat hij zei. Hij had net zo goed het clublied van het Vlaams Blok kunnen zingen, of zoiets –
>
> *Die verdwaald is*. Niet dus, dacht Floris-Jan, niet verdwaald, helemaal niet verdwaald, zeker niet verdwaald […]. *Die mokro, ja zo noemen ze zich tegenwoordig, vroeg hem iets, iets over een meisje of zo, maar daar was het niet om te doen. Ze waren in de struiken verborgen, Ali Baba en zijn veertig roversmokro's, en dan moet je een stoere jongen zijn, een hele bink, om niet, nou ja, je weet wat er daarna gebeurde –*[96]
>
> 'It must be a stranger.' And then again: 'A stranger, nothing special.'
>
> From the collected work of the Late Night Drinkers: [...] According to the bystanders, these were Floris-Jan's late friends, the beginning of the end, to say it in a Mulischian way, or, if you like, la fin, that bullshit about stranger or not. He signed his death with blood, the shit was beaten out of him. They may have done other stuff to him, stuff they enjoy in that culture, but which they'd rather not know about. Stuff that cannot see the light of day, you know what we're saying, we don't know, we do know. In any case: he was found, gagged, like a sucking pig ready to be grilled.

96 Ibidem: 170-171. The middle part of this quotation, from "From the collected …" to "…anthem, or something –", has been removed in the second, revised edition.

> Bloody daft, I say. Floris-Jan didn't just have the wrong attitude, which was bad enough as it was, but on top of that, he didn't know what he was saying. He could just as well have started singing [an extreme right-wing] anthem, or something –
>
> *Who has lost his way*? Well, he hasn't, Floris-Jan thought to himself, he hasn't lost his way, not lost his way at all, certainly not lost his way [...]. *That Mocro, yes, that's what they call themselves these days, asked him something, something about a girl or whatever, but that was not what he was after. They were hiding in the bushes, Ali Baba and the forty Mocro thieves, and then you'd have to be a real tough chap, a real hunk, or else, oh well, you know what happened next –*

This passage is virtually untranslatable in its quintessentially Dutchness. This starts with the first sentence, "It's a stranger" ["'t Is een vreemdeling zeker"]. This is not only a rather old-fashioned way of referring to a foreigner; it's also a line straight from a song for Saint Nicolas Day, the fifth of December, which is a sort of Dutch Christmas Eve. Instead of Father Christmas, presents are handed out by Saint Nicolas, a Roman Catholic bishop with a crowd of helpers called the Black Petes – white people in blackface, which is seen by many as a slightly racist Dutch tradition. One of the many songs children sing on this day has the lines "Listen, who's knocking, children/Listen, who's knocking softly at the window/It must be a stranger/He must be lost/I will ask for his name".[97] Next the text mentions the "Late Night Drinkers" ["de Borrelaars van het Late Uur"], not only a reference to the typically Dutch activity of 'borrelen' (having a social get-together with drinks), but also to the notion of 'borrelpraat' (literally 'drinking talk'), viz. the spouting of populist, ignorant and often right-wing opinions about social issues.

The narratologist Monica Fludernik has called the process that we can discern in this passage, following Franz K. Stanzel, "reflectorization": for a while, the narrator assumes the point of view and the idiom of one of the characters (called the "Reflektorfigur") to show and experience the world through the eyes, consciousness and worldview of that character.[98] In this passage, there is actually a double reflectorisation: cited in free indirect speech and embedded in the representation of Floris-Jan's thoughts, the "Late Night Drinkers" speak as a choir commenting on the events in an absurd kind of drivel. In it, different 'Dutch' voices are cited: the student-like "Bloody daft, I say", the pseudo-intellectual "Mulischian" (viz. in a way reminiscent of the famous Dutch author Harry Mulisch), "la fin", and slang words such as the Surinamese "mocro" (a reappropriated name that Moroccan youngsters in Dutch big cities use to refer to themselves). The colloquial "you know what we're saying, we don't know, we

97 "Hoor wie klopt daar kinderen/Hoor wie klopt daar zachtjes tegen het raam/'t Is een vreemdeling zeker/Die verdwaald is zeker/Ik zal eens even vragen naar zijn naam".

98 Monika Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* (1993): 391.

do know" stresses the notion that a large group of people seems to be talking here.

Perceived through the eyes of Floris-Jan and his imaginary friends, the sympathetic Mehdi suddenly turns out to be an exotic barbarian who gags his victims and does "stuff" to them, the kind of "stuff they enjoy in that culture". Faced by a Dutchmen, Mehdi is now representing a culture of a corrupt, threatening community, as we see later in this passage: "No, the police doesn't do anything. There's Mocros working there as well, these days, they won't tell on their brothers, of course. Those are nothing but their keepers, I'm telling you".[99] At the same time, this racism and exotism is not so much addressed, or even simply attacked, as it is ridiculed, permeated as it becomes with Saint Nicolas children's songs and fairy tales.

Again, we can recognise Benali's strategy to neutralise a 'clash of civilisations' by making potentially dangerous discourses such as racism and Islamism 'small' and clownish. Withdrawal and the "identity industry" are depicted in recognisable ways in order to expose them, but at the same time they become the most important elements of the plot. What Benali describes in his op-eds as the defining dynamics of the relationships between contemporary Dutch society and its Muslim community, he uses for the plots of his stories about encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims in his literary work. By staging social stereotypes in a caricatured way, he questions the notion that such an encounter is necessarily a 'clash of civilisations'.

4.2. Border crossings

Kader Abdolah's claim that there is a gap between 'East' and 'West' is not a given truth in Benali's work.[100] He portrays 'East' and 'West' and the supposed difference between them in his stories, but at the same time deconstructs them. The strict dichotomy between these two worlds is challenged and disrupted both through the ironic way in which it is represented − because the characters that stick to it end up badly − and by the picaresque border trespassers that I mentioned earlier. In the last section of this chapter, I will analyse a number of these characters. I have pointed out before that the acquisition of autonomy is an important theme in Benali's literary work. Again, this is a literary adaptation of a notion that can also be found in the author's contributions to the public and the literary debate: the urge to tell one's own story. The Mansoers are presented in

99 "Nee , de politie doet er niks aan. Daar werken ook mokro's tegenwoordig, die gaan hun broeders natuurlijk niet verlinken. Dat zijn hun reinste hoeders, zeg ik je". Ibidem: 171.

100 Cf. the title of a collection of travel stories that the author published in 2011: Abdelkader Benali, *Oost is West* [i.e. East is West] (2011).

Benali's work as a perversion of this urge: the withdrawal is an attempt to acquire autonomy, to tell a story that allows them to escape other people's history, but this is done using "big words" that are not, in any way, personal or one's own. Moreover, the resulting stories turn out to be too unstable.

First, I will discuss in Section 4.2.1. how the border trespassers disrupt the 'truth' of 'East' and 'West' by stressing the unauthentic and living a life of lies, acting and fantasy. This is one of the reasons why I call them picaresque. By sliding the borders between "inside" and "outside", between Islamic and non-Islamic, characters like Van Ripperda behave like classic picaroons. After all, the picaroon, as Robert Alter writes in his classic study on the picaresque novel, has no clearly demarcated identity:

> Born in – or rather outside of – a hierarchical society where each individual is assigned a fixed place [the picaro] can envisage for himself the possibility of assuming multiple roles. Life is not for him a cut-and-dried product which the buyer must accept exactly as it is handed to him.[101]

This is true for the border trespassers in Benali's work as well. Surrounded by the caricature-like 'border guards' (another element often found in the picaresque tradition[102]), they show that the old "signs of identity" and the clear, black-and-white reality that they establish merely serve to hide a chaotic "'in-between' space". They know that the border guards' seemingly obvious ideas about what it means to be 'Muslim' or 'Western' and the strict separation between these two cannot hold: "The picaro, or to view the question genetically, the picaresque author, finds himself in a world where the centre cannot hold – which is precisely why the picaroon is an inveterate vagabond, turning and turning in a widening gyre".[103]

In his analysis of the early work of German author Günter Grass, John Reddick similarly links the picaresque tradition to the narrator of *Die Blechtrommel*, Oskar Matzerath, who shows some surprising similarities with several of Benali's characters and narrators, most notably those from *The Long Awaited*. Reddick adds, however, that Oskar's emotional involvement in the story that he narrates makes it impossible for him to be a true picaroon. Like the traditional picaroon in his role of an outsider, Oskar holds up a mirror to society, but Grass adds an element to this in *Die Blechtrommel*: "a sufficient sense of dislocation could be conveyed only by having Oskar suffer the reality as well as detachedly mirror it. […] Oskar is an abject victim as well as a sovereign picaro".[104] The

101 Robert Alter, *A Rogue's Progress* (1963): 41.
102 Ibidem: 70.
103 Ibidem: 41.
104 John Reddick, *The 'Danzig Trilogy' of Günter Grass* (1975): 63-64.

same can be said about many characters in Benali's oeuvre. In his short stories, novels and theatre plays, the border trespassers do not only question the certainties of the "identity industry", but also get lost, as it were, in the chaos of the "'in-between' space". In the stories that, unlike the fictional portrait of Van Ripperda, are not set in the past, the trespassing of borders is no cheerful "musical chairs". Despite the burlesque tone and the caricatures, the progress of the story is defined by an emotional investment of its main characters or narrator that is meant to lead to a sustainable identity in which the 'clash of civilisations' is neutralised.

The real picaroon, according to Robert Alter, is autonomous, an outsider who confronts the world with either a "delight in experience" or hostility and resentment – but never with engagement.[105] Benali's border border trespassersare, however, engaged because of their quest for the autonomy of their own story and a place in the world. As such, rather than the classic picaroon, they resemble Alice from the famous books by Lewis Carroll, to which Benali refers in *The Long Awaited*. After all, although Alice 'unmasks' the strange characters in Wonderland as "just a pack of cards", she desperately attempts to take part in their world throughout the entire story.[106] In Section 4.2.1., I will show by analysing the reference made in *The Long Awaited* to *Alice in Wonderland* how the story about Mehdi is not only influenced by Carroll's classic itself, but also by a series of essays on *Alice in Wonderland* by Dutch philosopher Nicolaas Matsiers. The border trespassers in Benali's stories end up fleeing to "refuges" to escape the chaos of the "'in-between' space" that is created by the encounters between the Islamic and the non-Islamic, and this is very similar to what Alice does according to Matsiers.

In Section 4.2.2. I will discuss the function of these refuges in Benali's short stories, theatre texts and novels. Remarkably, the autonomy that his characters are looking for is acquired by a new withdrawal, or – as I called it before – a backing out: in the end, after escaping their father's house or mosque and discovering that "outside" has only an identity crisis to offer, the characters decide to seek safety in their own utopias. The "kingdom" of purity, authenticity and demarcated identities makes place for a "kingdom" of lies and masks. It is not difficult to see the parallels between these utopias and Benali's notion of literature as a "refuge". In Section 4.2.3., in conclusion, I will discuss how the narrator of *The Long Awaited* and her story can be read as both a literary elaboration

105 Robert Alter, *A Rogue's Progress* (1963): 71.

106 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (1998): passim.

on and a problematising of the refusal to take a stand, which is the condition for true autonomy according to Benali.

4.2.1. Masks

A life of lies and masks appears several times in Benali's oeuvre, where it functions as an ideal of the good life. The most explicitly phrased example of this can be found in the theatre monologue Yasser. The speaker in this text is a Palestinian actor, Yasser Mansoer, who strongly resembles his famous fellow countryman and namesake Yasser Arafat. The setting is a dressing room, somewhere in the Netherlands, where Yasser is preparing to play Shylock in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, of which large portions are cited in Benali's theatre text. Yasser remembers the good advice his father gave him during his youth in Palestine. Thus, we find yet another father by the name of Mansoer in a text by Benali. However, this father is the opposite of the Mansoers in *The Long Awaited* and *Unclean* in all respects. The background that Benali gives his characters highlights the contrast between the different Mansoers even more. Father Mansoer and Sidi Mansoer are migrants. That is to say, they have, at least at one point in their life, crossed borders. For the father in Yasser, a Palestinian from the occupied territories, borders are obstacles that are much harder to overcome. Thus, the way in which this character formulates his dream to become an actor becomes rather poignant. His son remembers how, when he was a child, his father told him:

> Those are actors [...] they can act anyone, be anything, say anything and get away with it, even get paid too. When I was your age, I wanted to be an actor, and that way I would be able, by putting on a mask, to cross all borders, to learn foreign languages, to vie with kings and leaders. I could mediate between war and peace, between the living and the dead. [...] I would teach humanity what respect is. But I'm a builder, nothing more and nothing less. You can be anything you want if you are an actor, if only you want too. You are something in the world - a very small thing with a voice, but you are something.[107]

We can recognise the typically picaresque ability to play different roles in the fluid identity that this father recommends to his son. The necessity of such an identity is stressed by the citations of *The Merchant of Venice* as well. Shylock's famous monologue that starts with the words "Hath not a Jew eyes" is cited al-

107 I am using the translation that was made by Terra Ezra 2008, which was used by Studio Dubbelagent for their production of the monologue. This text was kindly made available to me by the author. Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2008): 18. Cf. Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2001): 52-53.

most integrally in *Yasser*, for instance.[108] In the context of Benali's theatre monologue, Shakespeare's text becomes the story of a man who is denied the chance to escape the story about the Jew that others have made up for him. In the discourse of father Mansoer, acting is presented as a way to escape such a 'coerced authenticity'. He does not demand that his son says "no to all that doesn't belong" in his worldview. Instead, he urges Yasser to live a life of 'mimicry': the imitation and adaptation that are made possible by the actor's "mask" are the most desirable source of identity according to his father – in striking contrast with the closed-off spaces, freed of any influence from outside, that are the ideal of his namesakes in other stories by Benali.

In *Yasser*, acting is clearly meant to function as the kind of refuge that literature can be in society according to Benali. It is therefore remarkable that this refuge is not sustainable in the theatre monologue. Beyond the make-believe world of the stage, the Palestinian actor Yasser discovers that he cannot "get away with it" at all, but that he will be sanctioned. His mother is furious: "My son played as a Jew./Get out of my house! Bastard! Spawn of the devil!"[109] The theatre offers no definitive "refuge" and the reason for this lies in Yasser's emotional involvement: in the end, the actor desperately wants to be taken seriously. The text is characterised by the same kind of exaggeration and caricatures that can be found in other work by Benali: Yasser claims that Shakespeare was, in fact, a Palestinian named "Sheik al Kabir"[110]; Yasser Arafat has a child on his lap who interrogates him like a Little Red Riding Hood (Abu Amar, why do you always wear those glasses?/All the better to see you with./Abu Amar, why do you have such a big nose?/All the better to smell you with./Abu Amar, why do you have such a big mouth?/Would someone take this child away please![111]); and Yasser's fake nose (a prop for playing Shylock, despite the fact that Mansoer with his large Palestinian nose does not need a prop to play the stereotypical Jew) is stolen in the train. Benali alternates such clownery with pathos, such as a harrowing passage about Yasser's place of birth: "[Where I was born is] called something else now. It has an Israeli name [...] You can't recognise it as Palestinian anymore. All reminders are gone. But it is still Palestinian."[112] The classic picaroon, positioned outside all common dichotomies, would not care whether something is Israeli or Palestinian – but Yasser would prefer play-

108 Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2008): 19-20. Cf. Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2001): 55-56 and William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*: Act III, sc. i, 61-76.

109 Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2008): 19. Cf. Abdelakder Benali, *Yasser* (2001): 55.

110 Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2008): 9. Cf. Abdelakder Benali, *Yasser* (2001): 24.

111 Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2008): 15. Cf. Abdelakder Benali, *Yasser* (2001): 42. Abu Amar ('Abû 'Ammâr) is a teknonym of Yasser Arafat.

112 Abdelkader Benali, *Yasser* (2008): 9. Cf. Abdelakder Benali, *Yasser* (2001): 24-25.

ing Yasser Arafat over playing Shylock. In the end, Yasser *is* looking for authenticity, the truth behind appearances and masks.

In other words, Yasser's emotional involvement is to be found in the question whether he himself may decide which role he will play. As we have seen, Benali frequently deals with a similar theme in his interviews and op-eds. In his literary work, the author explores the extent to which it is possible to write "down one's own story". In *The Long Awaited*, Mehdi dashingly declares that "we have to rewrite that history"[113] when Sidi Mansoer complains that the Moroccan children in the Netherlands have forgotten their "untouchable, clean past".[114] Mansoer, of course, wants nothing of this: "Everything has been written down and explained, the only thing that remains for haughty man is to be as a fish trying to escape his water and you understand, Mehdi, the impossibility of that".[115] It is, again, an attitude that Benali's border trespassers share with the picaroon: "the problem raised by the picaroon's peculiar marginal location is the conflict between free will and determinism", as Robert Alter puts it.[116] The one who crosses borders enables himself to tell his own story, but at the same time ends up in the margins – and whoever is located in the margins has no say over which mask is to be worn.

Interestingly enough, we do find real picaroons in Benali's work, but only in his historical texts, such as the fictional portraits that illuminate Herman Obdeijn's history of 400 years of contact between the Netherlands and Morocco and the theatre text *The Unfortunate One* which is set in fifteenth century Spain (and which will be discussed more extensively in Section 4.2.2.). Whenever contemporary Dutch society is the setting of his stories, the role of outsider is still an ideal, but, ultimately, not an option. The characters of these stories are unable to assume the pose of cheerful everymen that belongs to the picaroon. Mehdi in *The Long Awaited* is a good example of this. As a character, he is the alter ego of the Long Awaited, the narrator of the novel (which is stressed by the fact that his name is also one of the names of the Muslim Messiah[117]). Just like the narrator tries to construct an identity for herself by telling her story, Mehdi

113 "Dan moeten we die geschiedenis opnieuw schrijven". Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 42.

114 [O]ns onaantastbare, schone verleden". Ibidem.

115 "Alles is geschreven en beschreven, het enige wat de hovaardige mens rest is daar als een vis te zijn die aan zijn water probeert te ontsnappen, en je begrijpt natuurlijk wel, Mehdi, de onmogelijkheid daarvan". Ibidem.

116 Robert Alter, *A Rogue's Progress* (1963): 72.

117 'Al-mahdî', that is, the 'justly guided' (cf. note 2 above) – which is, of course, ironic, as it is the lack of something to hold on to, guidance, that is an important problem for Mehdi in the story.

has to talk himself into the world in one way or the other, create a place for himself. The narrator, in her turn, is an alter ego of the author, who wants to "mimic" a future identity in his work, in order to escape the identity that "others have made up" for him.

Thus, the stakes are high, despite all nonsense: is it possible to tell one's own story, or not? The experiences of Mehdi can be seen as an exploration of that story. This is made clear, for example, with the reference made earlier to *Alice in Wonderland*:

> [A]ls [Mehdi's vader] zich oprolt lijkt hij nog het meest op de rups die Alice in Verbazië goede raad geeft; die daar maar zit en zit, opgerold […]. 'Wie ben jij,' vraagt zijn vader hem, opgerold, benen gekruisd […] en Mehdi moet hem het antwoord schuldig blijven. Tweede vraag: 'Wie wil je zijn, Mehdi?' Zijn vader draait zich links en rechts om, zie ik hem toch grijpen naar een waterpijp? 'Een man? Een gelukkig man? […] Iemand die het geluk in eigen hand houdt? Wie ben jij?' vraagt de rups, de met zijn benen opgevouwen homo sapiens nogmaals en hij zegt er snel achteraan: 'Wie wil je zijn?' – twee gekmakende, het zenuwstelsel op stang jagende gedachten.
>
> [W]hen [Mehdi's father] rolls himself up, he most resembles the caterpillar who gives advice to Alice in Wonderland; who just sits there and sits, rolled up [...]. 'Who are you,' his father asks him, rolled up, legs crossed [...] and Mehdi has no answer to that. Second question: 'Who do you want to be, Mehdi?' His father turns left and right, do I see him reaching for a hookah after all? 'A man? A happy man? [...] Someone who holds his fortune in his own hand? Once again the caterpillar, the homo sapiens with his legs crossed, asks: Who are you? Quickly adding: 'Who do you want to be?' – two thoughts that drive you crazy, wreck your nerves.

This "Who are you?" is what the French philosopher Paul Ricœur calls "l'angoissante question" in *Soi-même comme un autre*, a study on narrativity and identity. Elsewhere, he writes of this question: "La réponse ne peut être que narrative. Répondre à la question 'qui?' [..], c'est raconter l'histoire d'une vie".[118] The reference to Carroll is fitting, for Alice is incapable of answering the caterpillar's "Who are you?" with a coherent story. Instead, she stammers: "I ca'n't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir […] because I'm not myself, you see".[119] She cannot explain herself because she refuses (or is unable) to go along with the absurdity of Wonderland.

Of importance here is the uncommon word used in the Dutch original to refer to "Wonderland": "Verbazië", rather than the usual "Wonderland", which is

118 Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990): 198 ; *Temps et récit III – Le temps raconté* (1985): 355.

119 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (1998): 41.

as much Dutch as it is in English. It was philosopher Nicolaas Matsiers, a translator of Carroll's books into Dutch, who proposed the neologism "Verbazië". This name would stress that Carroll chose the name "Wonderland" because the place in which Alice has her adventures is *a land that causes a sense of wonder* and not because it is *a land of wonders*. The Dutch "Wonderland" means the latter and cannot purvey the first meaning, unlike "Verbazië" (from the Dutch 'verbazen', meaning 'to be amazed'), which, according to Matsiers, would be a better translation.[120] Matsiers did chose to leave the traditional title, *Alice in Wonderland*, in his translation, but used his alternative *Alice in Verbazië* as the title for a collection of essays on Lewis Carroll and his work. Thus, the reference in *The Long Awaited* is not only to Carroll's book, but also to Matsiers' essays. This is noteworthy, because Matsiers' analysis of the character Alice seems to have served Benali as a model for shaping his main character in *The Long Awaited*. According to Matsiers,

> Alice is the embodiment of [...] common sense. However, the irritating thing for her is that she does *not* have this in common with her fellow characters. She is left alone, despite her *common* sense.
>
> If only for this, it is exceptionally wise for her to search within herself for a solution. Alice is a girl who is used to talking to and with herself. [...] She continuously thinks, aloud or silently, and this is how she ultimately preserves herself. She draws her own conclusions. She keeps herself company, in dreadful situations too.[121]

This is a third alternative to Sidi Mansoer's withdrawal and closing off, or trespassing borders and thereby exposing oneself to the strict border guards who might ask who you are, but who long ago devised that answer for you: to preserve oneself (one's *self*). At the same time, Alice's story shows how difficult this is, according Matsiers:

> Noticing how strange and different the world is in which she now finds herself, she wonders whether she herself might have changed, together with this world: whether she is the same as she was; and whoever she might be, if she is no longer the same person [...]. It is in this context that she thinks: well, let's recite a verse, then. She crosses her arms and starts – but the words do not come out the way they should.

120 Nicolaas Matsiers, *Alice in Verbazië* (1996): 76.

121 "Alice is een belichaming […At] van common sense. Het vervelende voor haar is alleen dat zij die nou juist *niet* gemeen heeft met haar medepersonages. Zij staat er, met al haar 'common' sense, helemaal alleen voor. Alleen daarom al is het buitengewoon verstandig van haar dat ze het bij zichzelf zoekt. Alice is een meisje dat de gewoonte heeft om in en met zichzelf te praten. […]. Want zij houdt zichzelf in stand door hardop dan wel in stilte aan het denken te blijven. Zij denkt er het hare van. Zij houdt zichzelf gezelschap, ook in barre situaties". Ibidem. Original italics.

> What Alice recites now, in her lonesome identity test, is a poem of two verses [...] a nonsense rhyme.[122]

A large part of *The Long Awaited* can be read as a similar "identity test" for Mehdi. As said, Mehdi ends up in an identity crisis after having gone to a "'in-between' space". The novel describes how he is treated for this by social workers. In a conversation with them, he says: "Even if you're lost for words, you can always bullshit yourself back into the world. It doesn't matter which language".[123] According to Matsiers, we can recognise, phrased in urban slang, Alice's tendency to "look for the solution with herself", which keeps her on her feet in Wonderland.

At the same time this is, once again, a withdrawal: Mehdi bullshits himself "back into the world", but out of society. That is, at least, how I interpret the ending of *The Long Awaited*. During the last part of the novel, the narrator is no longer the speaking voice. The text finishes with a letter written by Mehdi (who is finally in charge of his own story) in an American desert that is closed off to the outside world.[124] Again, Mehdi's story follows Matsier's reading of *Alice in Wonderland*:

> Alice [manages] to keep going [...], not by trespassing all kinds of borders, but by persevering in behaving courteously, according to a standard that is hardly applicable anymore. [...] That Alice will not solve her problems with this is made clear to her by the world around her, after which she usually quite simply walks away from these situations that have become fruitless for her – and then moves on.[125]

With that, we are back to the question I asked at the start of this chapter and that continuously echoes in Benali's work: does the "depraved borderland" that has come about through the encounter between cultures offer the possibility of "new

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122 "Constaterend hoe vreemd en afwijkend de wereld is waarin zij zich nu bevindt vraagt zij zich af of zij soms samen met die wereld veranderd is: of zij dezelfde nog wel is; en wie zij, als ze niet meer dezelfde is dan wel mag wezen […]. In dat kader ook is het dat ze denkt: nou, laat ik dan maar eens een versje opzeggen. Ze slaat haar armen over elkaar en begint – maar de woorden komen er niet uit zoals het moet. Wat Alice nu reciteert, in haar eenzame identiteitstest, is een gedichtje van twee strofen […] een nonsensvers". Ibidem: 55.

123 "Zelfs als je aan het eind van je Latijn bent, je kunt jezelf altijd terug de wereld in lullen. Maakt niet uit in welke taal". Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 302.

124 Ibidem: 394-396, 164.

125 "Alice [houdt] zich nu juist staande […], niet door allerlei grenzen te overschrijden, maar door zich hoffelijk te blijven gedragen volgens een standaard die nauwelijks meer van toepassing is. […] Het is de omringende wereld die duidelijk maakt dat Alice daarmee niet uitkomt, waarna zij gewoonlijk domweg uit een voor haar vruchteloos geworden situatie stapt – om verder te gaan". Nicolaas Matsiers, *Alice in Verbazë* (1996): 61.

signs of identity", or has it become a "fruitless situation"? In other words, is it possibile to "rewrite [...] history"? This suggestion made by Mehdi in the novel can, just like Van Ripperda's kingdom of lies, be read as a poetic statement. That is to say, it is in line with the suggestion that the re-writing of history, the telling of one's own story, is made possible in Benali's literary work because it functions as a "beyond", as Bhabha calls it. In the next two subsections I will deal with the different, partly contradictory, answers in Benali's work to the question about how realistic this "beyond" really is.

4.2.2. To America!

In any case, the "beyond" in Benali's work does not lie *in*, but *beyond* the "'in-between' space". The author presents his border trespassers as pioneers, searching for new grounds. Not for nothing does Mehdi withdraw to a desert in America. There are more instances to be found in Benali's stories where America becomes a "beyond". The author does not seem to be referring to the United States, but rather to a mythical America of pioneering and new ways of life, where the old can be forgotten and left behind. The America of which Henry David Thoreau, for instance, writes in his essay "Walking": "The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions".[126]

Thus, it is no accident that Benali gives many of his border trespassers a fascination for the Atlantic Ocean and what lies beyond it. In *Christmas in Oostende*, for instance, the seven year old Joesoef is captivated by the sea (the North Sea, discharging in the Atlantic Ocean). His parents have withdrawn into their house after moving to the Flemish seaside-town of Oostende. In the story, a dichotomy is created between the sea and Islam: "The house smelled like a holy and obscure M. *Outside*, there is the sea. Joesoef knows this. *Inside*, there is a kind of M."[127] M. refers to Mecca, the heart of Islam, and through this juxtaposition the sea comes to symbolise the non-Islamic. The parents want nothing to do with this sea – we read in the first line of the story that "Joesoef is the first to hear the sea"[128] – but that is exactly why Joesoef wants to go there: he can be "the first", acquire independence, because "sea is for him neither mother nor father".[129] Benali plays here with the name of the town in which his story is set.

126 Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1998 [1862]): 1961.

127 "Het huis rook naar een heilig en ondoorzichtig M. Buiten is de zee. Dat weet Joesoef. Binnen is een soort van M." Abdelkader Benali, *Kerstmis in Oostende* (1999): 4. Emphasis added.

128 "Joesoef is de eerste de zee hoort". Ibidem: 3.

129 "[Z]ee is voor hem moeder noch vader". Ibidem.

"Allah is gone. He has returned to Morocco and Joesoef knows this", we read when Joesoef is watching his father pray.[130] Here, the East ('Oost' in Dutch), "the Old World and its institutions" have come to an end ('ende'). Thus, this Oostende is a "fruitless situation" that leaves but one possible way out: *Go West, young man!*

In *The Unfortunate One*,[131] a theatre text about Boabdil, the last Moorish sultan of Granada (and thus about another kind of 'end of the East' in Europe), Benali links the 'moment of origin' of this mythical America with the myth of a "kingdom" of one's own, and "one's own story" that plays such an important role in his work. A central character in this text is, once again, an actor: Alí, an opportunistic troubadour, who is Muslim or Catholic, whatever suits him best at a particular moment. On the eve of the fall of Granada, Boabdil offers Alí the robe of the Sultan and all the privileges that come with it. At first, Alí is elated, but he quickly discovers that Boabdil's throne will be worth nothing the next day. He wonders what he might do next:

> Teruggaan, teruggaan naar wie ik was? Alí? Dit alles vergeten? Maar dan zal ik [Boabdil] weer tegenkomen, en weer in dezelfde val trappen. Ik moet vooruit, ik kan niet anders. Wie kan ik dan nog worden? Koning lijkt me het hoogste wat er is… De volgende stap is koning van mijn eigen land, van een nieuw land. Maar waar zou ik dat vinden? Deze platte aarde zit vol landen, allemaal bezet door koningen. Het land is op, alles zit vol.[132]
>
> Go back, go back to who I was before? Alí? And forget all of this? But then I will meet [Boabdil] again and fall into the same trap again. I have to go forward, there is nothing else I can do. Then who could I become? King seems to me the highest there is... The next step would be king of my own country, of a new country. But where could I find this? This flat earth is full of countries, all taken by kings. We're out of land, everything is full up.

For Alí there will be no withdrawal into an existing "kingdom", but a backing out of a situation where all countries are already taken by kings. The troubadour then changes into Christopher Columbus. As explorer, he is no longer bound to "this flat earth" and will indeed find a "new land": America. Thus, like in his op-eds, Benali stresses the necessity of refuges in his stories. When we read their settings as what Bhabha has called "'in-between' spaces", as I have done in the preceding sections, they show first and foremost that it is at least questiona-

130 "Allah is weg. Hij is terug naar Marokko en dat weet Joesoef". Ibidem: 6.

131 The title of this play, *De Ongelukkige*, refers to the novel by famous Dutch eighteenth century author Louis Couperus on the same topic, with the same title. Cf. Benali's dedication to Louis Couperus who "told the story in a different way" ("het verhaal op een andere manier vertelde"). Abdelkader Benali, *De Ongelukkige* (1999): 4.

132 Ibidem: 50.

ble whether new "signs of identity" can thrive here. Rather than gaining a new identity, as Bhabha has it, Benali's stories show how it is much more likely that one will lose one's identity *in-between* "here and there […] fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth". This can be prevented by a withdrawal, but that would result in a situation where one is also at the mercy of other people's stories. Only outside those dichotomies, in the "beyond", can characters acquire autonomy. In *The Unfortunate One* this is playfully stressed by repeatedly citing a Dutch children's song called "Berend Botje". In this well-known nursery rhyme, a person called Berend Botje sets out on a voyage from which he will never return: "Where has Berend Botje gone?/He isn't *here*, he isn't *there*/He's gone to America".[133]

4.2.3. (Not) to take a stand in *The Long Awaited*

Benali's work continuously oscillates between on the one hand the refusal to withdraw and on the other hand the determination to back out of the chaos of the "'in-between' space" by being neither "here" nor "there", but also between the playful refusal to take a position and the necessity to do so in the end. We discerned something similar in Benali's *posture*. On the one hand, he presented his work as a "refuge", where he can escape locking himself "in a polarisation". On the other hand, this work had to have societal relevance. Does societal relevance not always imply that the literary autonomy is relinquished to a certain extent? Benali has taken quite some effort, both within and outside his literary texts, to give the impression that his work in general and *The Long Awaited* specifically might offer solutions for social issues. The implication is that his stories merge fragmented society into a unity because the author is capable of bringing everything together. In an interview he claims, for instance, that while writing *The Long Awaited* he asked himself: "Can you live up to it? Can you play with low and high culture just like Salman Rushdie. Can you juxtapose different worlds? The banal next to the elevated and vice versa?"[134] He gives an answer of sorts in the novel when he devotes a chapter to a "strange author [who] had won a Dutch award"[135]:

133 "Waar is Berend Botje gebleven?/Hij is niet hier, hij is niet daar/Hij is naar Amerika". Ibidem: passim.

134 "Kun je het waarmaken? Kun je net als Salman Rushdie spelen met low en high culture; kun je totaal verschillende werelden naast elkaar zetten? Het banale naast het verhevene en andersom?" Cited in Ricci Scheldwacht, no title (2002).

135 "Een vreemde schrijver had een Nederlandse prijs gewonnen". Abdelkader Benali, De langverwachte (2002): 304.

> [De vader van Mehdi] ging de radio bellen om zijn beklag te doen. Het voelde alsof iemand de bakstenen van zijn huis had gepikt, er zijn eigen huis mee had gebouwd en daar nu flink mee aan het pronken was. Ze zeiden dat hij een Marokkaan was, een jonge Marokkaan die als hij een pen vastpakte veranderde in een Hollandse kameleon en alles wat op zijn weg kwam in het Hollands opschreef.[136]
>
> [Mehdi's father] was going to call the radio to complain. It felt as if someone had stolen the bricks off his house, had built his own house and was now flaunting it mightily. They said he was a Moroccan, a young Moroccan who changed into a Dutch chameleon whenever he picked up a pen and wrote down everything that crossed his path.

The metaphor of the chameleon reminds us of the 'mimicry' of the actors in Yasser, who have a fluid identity and always "get away with it". Similarly, it fits Benali's strategy of backing out: a chameleon does not have to show its true colours. However, that does not mean that people like Mehdi's father will not sanction authors like this for their transgressions. To put it differently: there is an unsolved tension in Benali's work and what he claims is its societal relevance. On the one hand, there is the conviction that hybrids are possible, that so-called contradictory categories such as 'Muslim' and 'Western' and 'Moroccan' and 'Dutch' can be merged. On the other hand, there is an almost fatalistic sense of giving up because the "identity industry" is viewed as a fruitless situation that can only be solved by an escape into literature or a utopian kingdom.

This tension is personified by the narrator of *The Long Awaited*: will she succeed in talking herself into the world, or is there no place for her identity, the Moroccan-Dutch hybrid that she has created out of the discourses of both her backgrounds, outside the shelter of the womb? (Which can be seen as a kind of withdrawal as well or at least as seclusion.) This is posed as the central issue of the novel as early as the second page, where the narrator questions the story she is about to tell: "Is this enough material for a birth?"[137] This is a direct question to the reader as well, who may feel addressed by the undefined "you" that the narrator is speaking to.[138] Only if she can convince this addressee of the fact that Morocco and the Netherlands, Islamic and non-Islamic may be merged into one narrative, the Long Awaited can exist. With this, the story she is about to tell becomes a kind of evidence-narrative: the coherent whole that it forms shows that she may exist. In *Soi-même comme une autre*, Paul Ricœur claims that the narrating of stories creates a "synthèse de l'hétérogène": by adding a plot, di-

136 Ibidem.

137 "Is dit genoeg materiaal voor een geboorte?" Ibidem: 8.

138 As in a sentence such as "ik moet u vertellen hoe mijn andere grootvader aan zijn slagerij kwam" ("I have to tell you how my other grandfather acquired his butcher's shop". Ibidem: 14.

verse events and acts form a unity for the duration of the story. In the case of a life story, that which happened to a person and that what he or she has done is emplotted, resulting in what Ricœur calls an "identité narrative".[139] In *The Long Awaited*, this synthesis of the heterogeneous has a cultural, even ideological character, because clashing civilisations are merged in the narrative identity of the narrator.

Within this narrative perspective, the language and the image that the narrator uses while merging these cultures – this is the mix of discourses and styles I have mentioned before − function as a kind of evidence as well. Here, the Sint Nicolaas songs, references to Muslim, Greek and Christian mythology, Moroccan superstition and Dutch rationality all come together. Take for instance a passage such as this:

> Ik wilde dit hoofdstuk eerst "Ik kom net terug uit de hel. Gun me een minuutje rust" noemen, maar kwam er aan het einde achter dat er noch hel noch rust in voorkomt, toen bedacht ik dat het iets met "vader" en "vergiffenis" moest zijn, maar toevallig heb ik die titel al een keer gebruikt, dat is de reden dat ik dit hoofdstuk titelloos – zoals soera acht als enige een aanhef mist – heb gelaten.[140]
>
> At first, I wanted to call this chapter "I've just returned from hell. Allow me a moment of peace", but at the end of it I discovered that it contains neither hell nor peace, so I thought up something with "father" and "forgiveness", but as it happens, I have used that title before [in the eighth chapter, "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do"], which is the reason why I left this chapter without a title – just like sura eight is the only one without an introduction.

The words of Luke 23:34, the knowledge that a "sura" is a chapter of the Koran, and that in the entire Koran only one sura lacks the introduction "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful": it is all part of the matrix of the *e pluribus unum* discourse that Benali has given his narrator.

Here, the intertextuality with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in *The Long Awaited* becomes significant. It is not surprising that there are, as I have discussed earlier, striking similarities between Benali's border crossing characters and Günter Grass's Oskar Matzerath: Benali has often acknowledged he has been influenced by Salman Rushdie, who in his turn has often named Günter Grass as one of his main sources of inspiration. *Midnight's Children* has, for instance, been called "an Indian Tin Drum" because of the many similarities between Saleem Sinai, the narrator of Rushdie's novel, and Oskar Matzerath.[141]

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139 Paul Ricœur , *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990): 168-169.

140 Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 207.

141 Patricia Merivale, "Saleem Fathered by Oskar" (1994): 83-96. Rushdie has always stressed that *Die Blechtrommel*, together with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, in-

There are several literal references to *Midnight's Children*, but most striking is how Benali has explicitly modelled his narrator on Saleem Sinai. Both are children with a special gift: Saleem Sinai claims to be telepathic; the Long Awaited possesses a thumb that enables her to merge what cannot really be brought together.[142] Both are looking for a place in the world where they can be themselves (where *their selves* can be). And both try to create this place through the story they are narrating.

It is, however, the *difference* between Saleem Sinai and the Long Awaited that make the intertextuality with *Midnight's Children* most significant. While Sinai fails, in the end, in his attempts to create a meaningful unity with his story, the Long Awaited succeeds in precisely this. Sinai's story ends with what Damian Grant has called "the dissolution of that single citizen [Saleem Sinai] in the mass".[143] At the end of *Midnight's Children*, Sinai dies, literally fallen apart, because he can no longer create a unity out of the Indian plurality. At the end of *The Long Awaited*, on the other hand, the narrator succeeds in having herself born by successfully telling her story of oneness.

In this way, the Long Awaited embodies, as it were, the hybrid solution (both in the sense of 'to dissolve' and 'to bring to a satisfying end') for the 'clash of civilisations'. Once again, the power of lying, or fantasy, is stressed here, because her story is made possible by a special gift located in the narrator's thumb – a reference to the Dutch expression that 'something is sucked out of one's thumb', meaning that it is made up. With help of this special gift, the narrator presents herself, her birth, as the logical outcome of the story that she tells. Here, history finds its destination:

> Iedereen probeert op zijn manier aan de geschiedenis te ontkomen […]. Vanaf het moment dat ik er was moest alle aandacht gericht zijn op mij en moesten mijn ouders weten dat ze het verleden met een gerust hart achter zich konden laten, zodat ze mij, hun levende fossiel, konden omarmen en koesteren.[144]
>
> Everyone tries to escape history in their own way [...]. From the moment that I arrived, all attention had to be directed at me and my parents had to know that they could leave the past behind them with an easy mind, so that they could embrace and cherish me, their living fossil.

Like a "fossil", history, which Mehdi would have dearly liked to rewrite and which according to Sidi Mansoer could not be escaped, is simultaneously turned

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fluenced him significantly while writing *Midnight's Children*. Cf. for instance an interview with John Mitchinson, "Between God and Devil" (2001): 96.

142 Which can be seen as yet another reference to the importance of lying: the Dutch expression that 'something is sucked out of one's thumb', means that it is made up.

143 Damien Grant, *Salman Rushdie* (1999): 52.

144 Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 14.

to stone and kept alive in the character the Long Awaited. This fits her role of Messiah: she takes on other people's history and by doing so delivers them from it. The Long Awaited, to whom the characters can direct their attention – and who thus becomes their point of orientation – 'saves' them from their identity crises, from the disorientation and loss of direction of the "'in-between' space". As a hybrid of Dutch and Muslim, she is, after all, a synthesis of these clashing cultures.[145]

There are several instances where I have called the refuges in Benali's work utopian. This is an especially fitting term in this context, as Thomas More localised the original Utopia somewhere in the New World and put together its name from the Greek οὐ (not) and τόπος (place). Benali's refuges are utopian in the sense that they cannot exist: the mythical America, the make-believe world of the theatre, made-up kingdoms. And although the womb is not an actual non-place, the return to its shelter is pretty much that – and return is never an option in Benali's work. That is precisely why the unity that the narrator creates is mere appearance, or make-believe. Benali has her describing herself as an "unborn Long Awaited who, biding his time with a thumb in his mouth, knits the world together while he's waiting".[146] However, the resulting made-up story is, just like Yasser's acting, only a temporal solution. In order to be born, she has to give up her special gift: "only now I realise that [...] the gifts have to be put away [...]. It is about time to jump into life".[147] Outside the shelter of the womb, there is the "identity industry", where no-one gets "away with it". And when the story ends, the "refuge" that literature offers disappears as well.

According to Paul Ricœur, literature is "un vaste laboratoire où sont essayés des estimations, des évaluations, des jugements d'approbation et de condamnation par quoi la narrativité sert de propédeutique à l'éthique".[148] This seems to hold true for these stories about the demarcating and trespassing of borders in

145 Cf. Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, "Genoeg materiaal voor een geboorte?" (2007): 381-382, where I discuss how a new-born child presenting the solution for and deliverance of a community is a returning theme in literature about migration and memory.

146 "[E]en ongeboren Langverwachte die met een duim in de mond zijn tijd beidt en nog even de hele wereld aan elkaar breit". Abdelkader Benali, *De langverwachte* (2002): 123. It is rather strange that the Long Awaited, who turns out to be a girl after her birth, refers to herself as male here. Again, the poor editing of the text might be the reason for this 'mistake', but one could also argue that she switched gender deliberately to escape the chain of failed father-son relations in her family and instead opt for the female domain, which in the text is constructed as the non-discursive, where there is no coerced authenticity.

147 "[n]u pas weet ik dat […] de gaven voorgoed worden opgeruimd […]. Het wordt tijd om het leven in te springen". Ibidem: 337.

148 Paul Ricœur , *Soi-Même comme un autre* (1990): 139.

the encounter between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, after the experiment there are, inevitably, sanctions. Narrative is indeed just a propaedeutic to ethics: once the story is told, all will be judged, even for Benali with his claim to a non-stance. The author acknowledged that he knows this all too well when he said in an 1997 interview, seemingly negating his carefully constructed myth of the "refuge": "Apart from Jesus Christ and the prophet Mohammed, everybody's balls are stuck".[149]

5. Concluding remarks

For Abdelkader Benali, the encounter between the Islamic and non-Islamic are both the context and the setting of his literary work. In his contributions to the public debate, he speaks about the "myth of the clash of civilisations" while referring to this encounter and he claims that his literature contributes to the negation of this myth. With that, his work enables both a personal emancipation of the author and a possible escape for his readers. The author can, through writing, formulate his "own story". And his readers find a "refuge" where they can evade the dichotomy of 'East' and 'West', the coercion to choose a position – a coercion that, according to the author, will merely make the myth reality.

The same dynamics of escaping one's background and evading the coercion to make a choice can be found in the plots of his stories. In the encounters between the Islamic and non-Islamic, border guards such as the Mansoers, Rob Knuvelder and the dog patrol the demarcations between both worlds. Thus, the "identity industry" is ironically portrayed as the setting of his stories. According to Homi K. Bhabha, Benali places the rigidity of his border guards against the "restless movement" that characterises the "'in-between' space". And although Benali's stories testify of a certain sympathy for these characters and their frightened withdrawal, their locking up and closing off and their coercion to choose, they are presented as characters who are impossible to take seriously – or are potentially dangerous, as in *Unclean*. Thus, the author eliminates what he does not appreciate about the Muslim community and Dutch society.

In his literary work we discern, in compliance with his contributions to the public and literary debate, how very few characters succeed in adapting themselves – by becoming an-Other – in their meeting with the Other. The promise of "new signs of identity" that "'in-between' spaces" hold according to Bhabha is rarely fulfilled in the mimetic sphere of meaning of Benali's literary work. For characters who do not have the ability to lie a kingdom into being or make up a story of unity, it is impossible to truly tell their "own story". Only a *deus ex*

149 "Op Jezus Christus en de profeet Mohammed na zit iedereen met zijn kloten klem". Cited in Marije Vlaskamp, no title (1997).

machina such as the Long Awaited, with her special gift, is capable of creating a true unity. However, that unity is not brought about between the "here" and "there" of the "'in-between' space" that is the setting of almost all of Benali's stories written between 1996, the year of his debut, and 2003, when *Unclean* was published. It is to be found beyond the dichotomies he creates in his work: there lies the "refuge" where "new signs of identity" can be found.

Benali has the tendency to paint the encounter between the Islamic and the non-Islamic in society as a "fruitless situation" in his op-eds and interviews and in the thematic sphere of meaning of his stories. According to Nicolaas Matsiers, Benali's solution is the same as Alice in Wonderland's choice: to simply walk away. As said before, literature offers the author and his readers the possibility to do so. Similarly, his characters search for a location beyond the dichotomy of "inside" and "outside": America as it functions in *The Long Awaited* and *The Unfortunate One*, for instance. Or, in a more abstract way, Mehdi bullshitting himself into the world in *The Long Awaited*. At the same time, the withdrawal from the "'in-between' space" is an evasion of the choir of voices and discourses that Benali has echoing in his stories in a burlesque – but sometimes downright sinister – way. The author withdraws from the public space and society to seek his salvation in literature, just as his characters and narrators withdraw into the womb and desert. Just as the dog perverts Pim Fortuyn's words into repetitive nonsense, the Wittgensteinian wisdom "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" becomes a tautological "who cannot speak, must be silent" in Benali's work. After all, one's own story cannot be formulated in a place where that choir of voices can be heard. It is therefore noteworthy that in the stories that he published after 2003 Benali remained silent about the subjects that played such an important role in his early work. It is as though from then onwards the author felt there was nothing left to say about the possibilities created by the encounter between Islam and Dutch society. As if a conclusion had been drawn with the utopian ending of *The Long Awaited* and the eruption of violence that confronted the reader with the utter consequences of the "rigidity" of withdrawal and the disorientation that characterises life in the "'in-between' space".

There is something strange about the "beyond" in Benali's stories. It is mainly brought about by a superior withdrawal from 'all the fuss'. The withdrawal that is thus presented as a solution is surprisingly like Sayyid Qutb's migration, inner or not: the withdrawal from a society where one cannot live according to one's own laws. For Qutb this is a means to establish Islamic sovereignty; for Benali's characters this is the possibility to become autonomous, to tell "one's own story" – and with the notion of literature as a "refuge", this applies to the author himself as well. The main difference lies of course in the fact

that Qutb's withdrawal is a withdrawal into purity, while Benali and his characters seek to back out of the "identity industry" into the un-pure, the non-authentic. Thus they manage to create their own kingdom and thereby succeed to do exactly what the father in *Unclean* attempted: to create a private version of reality in a "shabby apartment". However, at the same time that solution seems far from sustainable: in his op-eds and when he talks about literature, Benali does little more than urge people not to make a choice. In his literary work it becomes, in the very least, clear, that a "refuge", such as acting in *Yasser*, is only a temporal solution. Much more often the "refuges" turn out to be utopias: locations that can never really be reached. The coercion to choose, to take a position, is, in other words, never really negated, but only delayed.

With that, the goal that Benali set himself with respect to society and that he aims for in most of his stories, i.e. to escape other people's history and other people's stories, seems unattainable for the author who has reached the conclusion that "everybody's balls are stuck". Thus, despite his claim that he does not want to take a position, Benali's short stories, novels and theatre texts can be seen as an indication of what the author considers the good life. After all, these stories can be interpreted as an attempt to destabilise both the "identity industry" and the fundamentalist withdrawal from society. If there is one thing that characterises these stories, it is the unmasking of the all-too-firm dichotomies that are brought about by the "identity industry" and fundamentalism. By doing so, Benali's work does have ethical and ideological consequences. If this is to be our conclusion, however, this means that we read Benali's op-eds and his literary work as a place where he takes a position − affirming that, in the end, no-one "gets away with it".

5. Hafid Bouazza

> *Mais l'Orient s'avance, invincible, fatal aux dieux de la lumière, par le charme du rêve, par la magie du clair-obscur.*
>
> Jules Michelet

1. Islam and the West imagined

In his 2003 translation of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, Hafid Bouazza adds a footnote to the scene in which Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness:

> Note how Othello, who demands 'ocular proof', is so blinded by Iago that he accepts his words ('auditive proof') as proof. It is not for nothing that much of Othello takes place during the night: the eye and delusions of the eye are an important leitmotiv in the text.[1]

The same could be said of Bouazza's own work: the eyes of almost all his characters are deluded by dreams, visions, memories and prejudices, which prevents them from clearly discerning their surroundings and others. In the Dutch literary field and society much the same thing can be seen, according to the author. He speaks, for example, of the exotist prejudices about authors with a foreign background that prevent his readers and critics from understanding that he writes in a Dutch rather than an Arab or North African tradition. And in Dutch society, people confuse the malicious nature of Muslims with cute cultural eccentricities. If we are to believe this author, there are but very few people whose eyes are not deluded.

Two contradictory conclusions can be found in critical studies with respect to the relationship between Bouazza's literary work and his opinions on society and literature.[2] A number of studies draw the conclusion that his novels, short

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1 "Merk op dat Othello, die 'ocular proof' wil hebben, zo verblind wordt door Iago dat hij diens woorden ('auditive proof') als bewijs accepteert. Het is niet voor niets dat veel in Othello zich 's nachts afspeelt: het oog en de begoochelingen van het oog zijn een belangrijk leidmotief in het stuk". William Shakespeare, *Othello. Vertaald en van een commentaar voorzien door Hafid Bouazza* (2003): 120.

2 Ieme van der Poel sees a similar dichotomy in critical studies on Bouazza and his work. She herself claims that it is wrong to assume that "Bouazza's literary work and his journalism are in line with one another" ("het literaire werk en het journalistieke werk van Bouazza in elkaars verlengde liggen"). Ieme van der Poel, "Literatuur-met-een-accent" (2009): 15. Personally, I would not define Bouazza's essays on literature and society as "journalism", but rather as the activities of a public intellectual.

stories and theatre texts contain the same social commentary as his op-eds: Muslim culture is backwards and Muslims should be forced to adapt to an individualist Dutch society.[3] For a large part, literary critics in newspapers and magazines draw similar conclusions.[4] However, there are a number of critics who have seen Bouazza's literary style and themes as an ingenious deconstruction of the way ethnic and religious minorities are treated in Dutch society. According to the latter, Bouazza criticises the rise of monoculturalism in Dutch society with his work, in which nothing is certain and ontologies, styles and perspectives continuously alternate. For instance, in *Homeless Entertainment*, her monograph on Bouazza's work, Henriëtte Louwerse reads Bouazza's novel *Salomon* as an attempt to resist the call by publicist Paul Scheffer (mentioned in the introduction of this study) to "take Dutch language, culture and history much more seriously".[5]

If Louwerse's analysis is correct, this would mean that the author's literature attacks the same stance on society that he wholeheartedly embraces in his own op-eds – an odd situation, to say the least. In this chapter I will show that Bouazza's literary work can be read both as a negation of the notion that individual and cultural identities are clearly demarcated and unchangeable *and* as a call to the Dutch to protect their own cultural identity against the rise of Islam. With that, we find the same paradox in Bouazza's literary work as in his op-eds: on the one hand, the author denies that there is such a thing as a homogenous Arab or Muslim culture, while on the other hand he frequently comments on the nature of Arabs and Muslims. In his literary work, this results in the strongly clichéd representation of encounters between the Islamic and non-Islamic. Because Bouazza clearly presents these clichés as 'fake', using a grotesque and exaggeratedly 'exotic' style, these representations undermine the authenticity of 'East' and 'West'. Whenever the Islamic and the non-Islamic encounter one another in Bouazza's work, there is a 'clash of delusions', rather than a 'clash of civilisations'. At first, Bouazza merely contrasts this with his own destabilising

3 Cf. for instance Liesbeth Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch* (2008):142. Admittedly, Minnaard does not come to this conclusion unequivocally. She does name it as the reason for the positive reception of a novel like *Paravion*.

4 Cf. for instance Jeroen Vullings, "De eeuwige schoolstrijd" (2003): "From that piece [Bouazza's op-ed calling for demonstrations for the liberation of female Muslims] it is only a short critical step to Paravion" ("Van dat stuk [Bouazza's opiniestuk "Demonstreer voor vrijheid moslima's"] is het een kleine cultuurkritische stap naar Paravion"). Nico Dros's article that I used at the opening of the introduction to this study gives similar reasoning. Nico Dros, "Over schrijverschap en politiek" (2003): 48-49. Cf. p. 1.

5 Paul Scheffer, cited in Henriette Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007): 168. Cf. the introduction to this study, p. 10.

and ironic play with stereotypes, without any positive outcome. However, his 2003 novel *Paravion* makes explicit what before was merely implied: imagination can bring about hybrid forms of 'East' and 'West' that are beyond any clash.

All in all, Bouazza's attitude towards cultural stereotypes is highly ambiguous. In his essays and literary works he seemingly attempts to unmask them: he pleads for a far-reaching individualism, where the Other is 'seen for who he is'. In 2004 he writes: "more and more people discover that there is such a thing as Arabs and more and more Arabs discover that they are Arabs".[6] This one-liner sums up the criticism that runs like a thread through Bouazza's literary work and his musings on literature and society: someone is not simply an Arab (or Moroccan, or Muslim), but becomes one because he or she makes a conscious decision to – or because someone else makes this decision for him or her. Several times, the author has stresses that he wants to break free of this. Commenting on this, Kader Abdolah once wrote in a column that Bouazza "just about kills [him]self with his longing to be Dutch".[7] Abdolah seems to miss the point: Bouazza's *posture* can better be summed up as a continuous expression of a longing for it not to matter whether he is Dutch or not. The literary division in Dutch writers and *allochtonous* authors, or the division of society in a Dutch and a Muslim part, leads to a "stranglehold", according to Bouazza. People reduce each other to the image that they have of each other's culture, and in the process both groups cultivate 'otherness' to the extent that only fundamental differences between themselves and the Other remains.

In other words, Bouazza turns 'othering' into the central theme of his writings. On the one hand, the process of othering becomes the target of his ironic – and at times, sarcastic – attacks in his contributions to the public and literary debate and the satire of his literary work. On the other hand, the author seems to make this mutual othering by 'Muslims' (or 'Arabs', or '*allochtones*') and 'Dutch' the driving force of his literary work and *posture*. He increasingly implies that the stereotyping of the Other – and oneself – is inevitable. The only thing left to do is to draw a bead on these stereotypes in an ironic play where they are seemingly embraced but ultimately disrupted from within. After all, stereotypes are a form of imagination and it is through imagination that we can escape an all too essentialist and rigid sense of identity: a reasoning that we have seen with Abdelkader Benali as well and which stands in contrast with Kader

6 "[E]r zijn steeds meer mensen die ontdekken dat er Arabieren zijn en steeds meer Arabieren die ontdekken dat zij Arabieren zijn". Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas. Autobiografische schetsen* (2004): 14.

7 "Hafid, je verlangt je bijna dood om een Nederlander te zijn". Kader Abdolah, *Karavaan* (2004): 148.

Abdolah's notions of 'East' and 'West' as being fundamentally different. On the one hand, stereotypes are an expression of essentialism. On the other hand, they are a form of imagination and facilitate the possibility of change and hybridisation. In his contributions to public and literary debates, Bouazza links this ironic play with stereotypes to his *posture* of a dandy: it is difficult to tell mockery and earnestness apart in his essays and op-eds, and this is by design. In his literary work Orientalist and Occidentalist stereotypes are aestheticised and function as stylistic techniques and themes.

2. Short biography and publication overview

Hafid Bouazza was born in 1970 in Oujda, a city in the east of Morocco. At the age of seven, he moved with his family to the Dutch village of Arkel. At the outset of his writing career, he said that he was not raised particularly religiously. In later years, he stressed that he did have a strict Muslim upbringing. He has claimed that his urge to free himself of Islam and clear a head "full of doctrines [...], full of rules and commandments" caused him to "experiment with drugs from an early age".[8] His use of drugs and his attempts to kick his habits are issues that the author often refers to in interviews and essays, which fits the dandy-like authorial *posture* mentioned above.

Bouazza studied Arab language and culture at the University of Amsterdam, but never finished his studies. He began publishing translations of modern Arab poetry in the early nineties (in, among others, a collection of poetry published by the Arabic cultural foundation El Hizjra in 1992[9]). At that time, he was already working on the short stories with which he debuted in 1996. He received the 1997 E. du Perron Award for this debut, *Abdullah's Feet* (*De voeten van Abdullah*, 1996, English translation 2000), published by Arena.[10] In 1998 Bouazza

8 "Maar hoe maak je je hoofd vrij als dat vol doctrines zit, vol regeltjes en geboden? Om daarvan los te komen, begin hij al vroeg met drugs te experimenteren". Paraphrased in Tom Kellerhuis, "Verlichte visioenen" (2003).

9 As Onder de naam Abdelhafid Bouazza. Abderazak Sbaïti en Simone Meilof Yben (samenstellers), *Brug tussen twee culturen. Arabische en Nederlandse poëzie gebundeld* (1992).

10 This is an annual award for a person or institute that has contributed to "the advancement of mutual understanding and good relationships between the communities that live in the Netherlands" ("gemaakt voor de bevordering van wederzijds begrip en een goede verstandhouding tussen de in Nederland woonachtige bevolkingsgroepen"). As I wrote in Chapter 3, the same award was given to Kader Abdolah in 2001. Cf. p. 44-45. If we compare the opinions of these two authors about the role they envision for their literary work in Dutch society, this award seems more fitting for Kader Abdolah than for Hafid Bouazza.

adapted a short story from this collection into the theatre play *Apolline* for Theater90. The text for this play was published in 1999 by publishing house Prometheus, which was to publish nearly all of Bouazza's work. The same year, the novella *Momo* appeared. There is not a single reference to Bouazza's migrant background in *Momo*, something that was extensively highlighted in its reception. An interviewer wrote, for example, that *Momo* was "almost provocatively non-foreign in its subject matter".[11] In the same interview, Bouazza points out that he did not pick the subject matter of his novella so that he would "no longer be labelled as foreign". However, the interviewer's remark shows how, at even an early stage in his career, Bouazza was very much seen as personifying a resistance to what has been called "the foreign corner" of Dutch literature.[12] This resistance was the central theme in the essay that Bouazza wrote in commission for the annual Book Week festival in 2001, *A Bear in Fur Coat* (*Een beer in bontjas*). Later the same year his first novel, *Salomon*, was published. While the reception of his earlier publications had been mostly positive, not in the least because of the author's exuberant style, newspaper and magazine critics were unanimous in their verdict that "the language alone" in *Salomon* "brings about a tremendous disgust" and that its "story, as far as it can be discerned, does not amount to much".[13]

Many critics perceived *Paravion*, Bouazza's second novel, published in 2003, as a return to form after the failure that was *Salomon*. "[T]he novel you have been hoping for years Bouazza would write", as one critic summed up the consensus.[14] Bouazza received the 2004 Golden Owl, a Flemish literary award, for *Paravion*, as well as a nomination for the prestigious AKO Literary Prize. That same year, the libretto *The beast with two backs* (*Het monster met twee ruggen*) appeared, which Bouazza wrote for a chamber opera by David Dramm. He also published a new edition of his 2001 Book Week Essay. In this revised edition, the original essay was complemented with more memoires and critical contemplations on the position of Moroccans and Muslims in the Netherlands. In the meantime, Bouazza had gained a reputation as a criticaster of the attitude held by Muslims in the Netherlands and Islam in general, following the publication of a series of op-eds in the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*.

11 N.N. "'Als ik al ergens woon, is het in de taal'" (1998).

12 Michel Maas, "Het ruikt tóch naar migrantensoep" (1996).

13 "Wekt de taal alleen al een geduchte weerzin op tegen 'Salomon', het verhaal, als dat al ontwaard kan worden, stelt evenmin iets voor". Tom van Deel, "Bouazza's trip met de Nederlandse taal" (2001).

14 "[D]e roman waarvan je al jaren hoopte dat Bouazza die zou schrijven". Arjen Fortuin, "Donderwolk aan heilige horizon" (2003).

Beside his work as an author of literary work, essays and op-eds, Bouazza continued to work as a translator. His translations of medieval Arab love poetry and erotica appeared in two collections, *Beautiful in Every Eye is That Which it Loves* (*Shoon in elk oog is wat het bemint*, 2000) and *Round for Round or Like a Pickaxe* (*Rond voor rond of als een pikhouweel*, 2002). The poetry from these collections were published again, in revised form and complemented with more translations in a third collection which also was called *Beautiful in Every Eye is That Which it Loves* (2005). This last collection was the first volume of an "Arabian library" (Arabische bibliotheek") in which Bouazza would publish a selection of Arabic erotica and pornographica. Bouazza translated two plays by Shakespeare as well: *Othello* (2003) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (published as *Het temmen van de feeks*, 2004). These Shakespeare translations were commissioned by the theatre group Toneelgroep Amsterdam, for which he adapted Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre in Paris* as well (published as *De slachting in Parijs*, 2001). Bouazza's translations of Arab texts and plays by Shakespeare are notable for their extensive annotation, which contains long, meandering asides by the author. In 2004 his translation of the children's book *The Bear that Wasn't* by Frank Tashlin appeared (published as *De beer die geen beer was*). That same year he received the Amsterdam Award (an award that is annually awarded by the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts) for his entire oeuvre – literary work, essays and translations.

3. A "mutual stranglehold" in literature and society

Bouazza concludes his poetical essay in *A Bear in Fur Coat* with the cry: "Long live imagination!"[15] It is clear that as far as the author is concerned, those words can be seen as the motto for his entire work and life. For Bouazza, imagination offers the possibility to escape what could be called 'coerced authenticity' – in much the same way as Abdelkader Benali's "refuge" of literature does. For Bouazza, however, "imagination" is not only the solution, but also the problem. He claims that 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' lock each other up in images created by Occidentalist and Orientalist prejudices. These prejudices are forms of imagination too, according to Bouazza. He presents this *image*-ination, as I would like to call it – a process in which the Other is turned into an image – as a sociological process that prevents people from seeing each other as individuals. Ultimately, Bouazza is very cynical about people's ability to perceive anything beyond these 'collective imaginations'. Bouazza increasingly presents the individualism with which he contrasts 'coerced authenticity' as the result of an 'individual imagina-

15 "Leve de verbeelding!" Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 61.

tion' that aestheticises 'collective imaginations'. This 'individual imagination' makes the "delusions of the eye" such as exoticism, Orientalism and Occidentalism, ambiguous – for instance, through an ironic or grotesque gaze. For Bouazza, such an aestheticising of 'collective imaginations' is an opportunity too: in the literary text it can be adapted as a "technique". To a large extent, this notion has determined his work, both stylistically and thematically, as I will discuss in Section 4.

In what follows, I will discuss how Bouazza develops this double role of imagination in his contributions to the public and literary debate. In Section 3.1., I will first discuss the way in which he presents himself as a literary author. This is characterised by his resistance to the notion that work by a migrant author is automatically special because of his or her descent. According to the author, there is a tendency in the Netherlands to perceive writers such as himself as 'different' and therefore to judge and read them differently as well. Bouazza's resistance to this is theatrical and much more vicious than Benali's. In interviews and essays he has introduced caricatured examples of readers and critics who make this mistake and of the kind of 'foreign' author who exoticises him or herself in order to capitalise on these expectations. While doing so, Bouazza tends to exaggerate the extent to which he has been perceived as a "migrant author" in order to strengthen his central thesis – i.e. that people can only see the image of him created by their own prejudices.

In Section 3.2. I will discuss Bouazza's contributions to the public debate, in which he sketches a similar dynamics – using similar caricatures – as in his essays and interviews on literature. According to the author, the Dutch tend to smooth over the backwards Muslim culture, perceiving it as sweet and exotic. He warns against this tendency being abused by Muslims to justify all kinds of misogynist and anti-Western customs and attitudes. While Bouazza's tone is light-hearted when he discusses literature – the author assumes an aloof and superior attitude, blatantly amusing himself with the silliness of his readers and critics – his contributions to the public debate are permeated with moral outrage. He stresses that 'we' have to adapt an uncompromising attitude towards Islam and demand of Muslims that they adapt to Dutch society. It is slightly problematic that while doing so, he backs his argument with the same kind of stereotypes that he dismisses elsewhere as delusions. In Section 3.3. I will discuss how this can be reconciled with – if not explained by – Bouazza's decadent *posture*. In his contributions to the public debate too, the author continuously presents himself as a dandy, as someone who, even when he discusses issues that he feels strongly about, does so in a roguish and stylised way. Just like Benali, he gains a certain elusiveness with this *posture*, although this is brought about in a different way with Bouazza. Unlike Benali in his op-eds, Bouazza does not refuse to take

a position, but when he does take a stance, he always does so in a more or less ambiguous way because of his continuously ironic tone of voice.

3.1. The migrant author and his "alien gaze"

In 2001, Bouazza was commissioned to write the annual essay for that year's Book Week. Despite the designation "Book Week Essay" ("Boekenweek-essay"), it is difficult to place *A Bear in Fur Coat* in any specific genre. At first it seems that the reader is indeed dealing with an essay in which Bouazza develops his thoughts on literature and descent. At the outset of his essay Bouazza notes how readers and critics tend to link his work to his Moroccan background. He then proceeds to say that he wants to investigate whether descent is indeed relevant for a 'foreign' author's work. Then there is a shift in genre: to answer this question, Bouazza starts telling his life story. This results in the strange situation that a text that is meant to show that "private information" about an author is irrelevant, consists largely of an autobiography.

However, this 'autobiography' – the revised edition of the essay published in 2004 was even given the subtitle *Autobiographical Sketches*[16] – is embedded in a fictional narrative situation: several peculiar characters have gathered around a "guest of honour", the writer Hafid Bouazza, during a Book Ball.[17] They have come together to hear his life story and to discuss its relevance for his work. In the text, four narrative voices can be discerned. First, the author himself seems to be speaking in the essayistic passages. Second, in the autobiographical passages we find the typical kind of narrator for this genre: an older "I" who reminisces about Hafid Bouazza's youth and migration to the Netherlands. However, because of the fictional embedding, this narrator does not necessarily coincide with the author. Third, there is a heterodiegetic, non-dramatised narrator speaking in the descriptions of the fictional Book Ball. Fourth, part of *A Bear in Fur Coat* consists of a speech given at the Book Ball by the fictional *allochtonous* author Haaris Boelfachr, the drift of whose argument corresponds with the essayistic passages.[18] Thus, the speaking voice in *A Bear in Fur Coat* belongs, alternatingly, to the author – either dramatised or not –, narrators and characters. This narrative structure disrupts the truth claim that

16 Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas. Autobiografische schetsen* (2004).

17 "[E]regast". The Book Ball (Boekenbal) is a fixed item during the Book Week, an invitation-only gathering for authors, publishers and others with a certain position in the Dutch literary field.

18 Henriëtte Louwerse notes that this name is synonymous with Hafid Bouazza: "Both names mean 'defender of pride'". Henriëtte Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007): 34n.

normally characterises the genre of autobiography and the usual assumption in essays that the opinion being expressed belongs to the author himself.

Yet it seems that the reader is meant to take seriously the central idea of the essay, i.e. that the theme of that year's Book Week, "writing between cultures", is irrelevant. This dismissal of the theme will not have come as a surprise to the Foundation for the Collective Propaganda for the Dutch Book (Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek, CPNB) who commissioned and published the Book Week Essay. It corresponds, after all, with what the author has always claimed. Even before his debut was published, Bouazza wrote a column in literary magazine *Vooys* about the many "Artist *Allochtones*" in the limelight at that time.[19] According to Bouazza, the attention for their work results from "positive discrimination".[20] He ridicules literary festivals such as "the horror project *In Other Words* (Institute for the Tropics) and *Crossing Border Festival* (Den Haag)", where descent is seen as more important than literary quality, according to Bouazza.[21] He also takes publishing companies to task: "Any publisher that's worth its name keeps an *allochtonous* author, a house-*allochtone*, a welfare-catamite, a Morian-teddy".[22] Even he, Bouazza, is now in a position where he can publish thanks to the hype surrounding 'foreign' authors:

> In a time when *allochtones* did not have the current cuddle-factor, my stories were refused. And there are still plenty of poor sods slaving away somewhere in a back room on the third floor, furiously typing, unwashed, uncombed, stained, in an autonomous world for which the bailiff and the landlord have no interest at all.
>
> I have been approached by a publisher![23]

The remark about an "autonomous world" is no doubt meant to foreground Bouazza's own, autonomist conception of literature: a conception in which there is no place for descent. The author does admit that he is an "opportunist" and will make use of the chances that his background creates, but adds: "I am vain and I have good hope that true quality will remain standing when this hysteria

19 "Kunstenaarallochtonen". Hafid Bouazza, "Allochtonen met een stem" (1996): 22-23.

20 "[P]ositieve discriminatie". Ibidem.

21 "[H]et gruwel-project In Other Words (Instituut voor de Tropen) en Crossing Border Festival (Den Haag)". Ibidem.

22 "Een beetje uitgever heeft tegenwoordig een allochtoon-schrijver in huis, een huis-allochtoontje, een welzijns-schandknaapje, een Moriaan-knuffeltje". Ibidem.

23 "[I]n de tijd dat allochtonen nog niet het huidige aaibaarheidsgehalte bezaten [werden] mijn verhalen […] geweigerd. En nog steeds zitten arme ploeteraars ergens drie hoog achter verwoed te tikken, ongewassen, ongekamd, bevlekt, in een autonome wereld waarvoor de deurwaarders en huisbaas geen enkele belangstelling hebben. Ikzelf ben door de uitgever benaderd!" Ibidem.

has receded".[24] Yet, he claims he fears that much of the positive attention now given to his work is the result of "ethnic courtesy".[25]

As I discussed in the introduction to this study, the Dutch government pursued a policy of encouragement for publishing so-called "migrant literature" and the organisation of festivals and other manifestations with an "intercultural character" in the nineties.[26] Thus, Bouazza's column fits in with the time it was written. Although the author no doubt means what he writes in this column, it can be read as a strategic literary position taking as well, an attempt to distinguish himself from the large group of 'foreign' authors who were debuting at the time. In order to do this, he does not eschew a certain degree of exaggeration. It is certainly true that at the time critics paid much attention to the background of authors with foreign origins.[27] However, Bouazza's descent has seldom been used to explain the author's alienating style.[28] He is mostly placed in a Dutch tradition and his critics see similarities with big names such as "Louis Couperus, Aart van der Leeuw and Stijn Streuvels".[29] Well-known critic Jaap Goedegebuure adds to this that by using the "stylistic bluff" of *Abdullah's Feet*, Bouazza has "with one stroke struggled out of the restraint of the designation 'foreign author'" and concludes that there is nothing 'foreign' about the author's debut: "No alien stains, however elegantly shaped, but merely a handful of fossils from our own linguistic heritage".[30] Another critic draws the same conclu-

24 "[I]k ben ijdel en ik heb de goede hoop dat, als deze hysterie over is, werkelijke kwaliteit zal blijven staan". Ibidem.

25 "[E]tnische welwillendheid". Ibidem.

26 Cf. the introduction, p. 12.

27 Cf. Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, "The evaluation and positioning of literary work by authors with a Muslim background" (2007): 244-247.

28 One of the very few examples I could find was a review of Abdullah's Feet in quality newspaper NRC Handelsblad: Reinjan Mulder, "Weelderig debuut van Hafid Bouazza" (1996). Mulder suspects that certain "expressions in his book [...] are most probably translations of Arab sayings that are unknown to us" ("uitdrukkingen in zijn boek […] waarschijnlijk vertalingen zijn van ons onbekende Arabische zegswijzen"). He concludes that "the Dutch language has been given a generous godfather thanks to Bouazza" ("de Nederlandse taal er dankzij Bouazza een vrijgevige peetvader heeft bijgekregen". Furthermore, Mulder assumes that "the stories and fantasies ("de verhalen en fantasieën") in Bouazza's collection are autobiographical to a certain extent.

29 Doeschka Meijsing, "Vreemde verhalen van Hafid Bouazza" (1996). All authors mentioned are nineteenth century authors known for their highly aestheticised use of language.

30 "[S]tilistische bluf"; "[hij] heeft zich in één klap ontworstelt aan de rem van de benaming 'allochtone schrijver'"; "Niks geen vreemde smetten, hoe sierlijk van vorm ook, maar gewoon een handvol fossielen uit het taaleigen". Jaap Goedegebuure, "De exotica van het gezochte woord" (1996).

sion, but writes that this style reminds her too much of "the artificial medieval prose of neoromantic Arij Prins", which leads her to evaluate *Abdullah's Feet* negatively, despite her praise for "Bouazza [not telling] the kind of stories drenched in nostalgia and filled with pain that one would – most probably – expect".[31] In other words, there is little "ethnic courtesy" to be found in the reception of Bouazza's work.

It is therefore quite striking that Bouazza writes in his Book Week Essay: "If I were to believe most critics, I am a Moroccan author".[32] This is simply not true for the critics who have written about his work in magazines and newspapers: none of them has ever called him a "Moroccan author". The "critics" that Bouazza talks about, seem to be straw men, put forward by the author to make his point, i.e. that an author should only be judged on his literary qualities:

> [D]e taal […] is het enige land waarin de schrijver zich thuis voelt. De taal is zijn identiteit, stijl zijn paspoort […]. De plaats van de schrijver is in de dominante cultuur. Hij moet beoordeeld worden met de maatstaven van die cultuur en verdient geen aparte behandeling.[33]
>
> Language [...] is the only country where the writer feels at home. Language is his identity, style his passport [...]. The writer's true place is the dominant culture. He must be judged according to the standards of that culture and he does not deserve any special treatment.

In *A Bear in Fur Coat*, Bouazza discusses two misconceptions upon which he believes this "special treatment" is based. First, there is the conviction that the work of migrant authors has a certain authenticity. Second, and in accordance with this, such authors supposedly see the world in a fundamentally different way. This "foreign gaze" is supposedly a source of literary quality, just as the assumed authenticity.

In her monograph on Bouazza's literary work, Henriëtte Louwerse rightly points out the importance of the blatant references in *A Bear in Fur Coat* to the Eighties Movement (Beweging van Tachtig), an important Dutch aestheticist literary movement from the 1880s. The references can be discerned in the language and style of Bouazza's essay, as well as in the conceptions of literature

31 "[H]et artificiële middeleeuwse proza van de neoromanticus Arij Prins"; "Het is natuurlijk mooi dat Bouazza niet de in nostalgie gedrenkte en van pijn vervulde verhalen vertelt die de lezer – allicht – verwacht". Xandra Schutte, "Witgetulband en wildgewingerd" (1996). It is noteworthy that one year earlier, Schutte did praise Kader Abdolah for writing about the nostalgia and pain of the exile in his second collection of short stories, *Of Girls and Partisans* (*De meisjes en de partizanen*, 1995). Cf. chapter 3, p. 69.

32 "Als ik de meeste critici mag geloven ben ik een Marokkaanse schrijver". Hafid Bouazza, Een beer in bontjas (2001): 9.

33 Ibidem: 31.

propagated. Most notably, a famous manifest by Willem Kloos, a foreman of the Eighties Movement, is called to mind. Just like Kloos, Bouazza emphatically points out imagination as the true source of any literature worth mentioning and demands total artistic freedom because of this.[34] These references function as a way of legitimising Bouazza's battle against "most critics". As Louwerse writes: "While Kloos demanded the autonomy of the artist and the literary work at a time when literature was predominantly a vehicle for a moral message, Bouazza demands the same autonomy and artistic freedom available to monocultural authors even, or maybe especially, in a time obsessed with multiculturalism".[35] Thus, Bouazza associates himself with what, in twentieth century Dutch literary history, has become the pre-eminently "model [...] of literary regeneration".[36] Up to today, the dismissal of the so-called "preacher poets" (authors of moralistic poetry, writing mostly about domestic issues) who supposedly dominated nineteenth century Dutch literature by the Eighties Movement is generally seen as a necessary "literary revolution, a cultural revolution, an upheaval, a rejuvenation cure".[37] The underlying rhetoric is that Bouazza stands in a tradition of legitimised literary resistance. It is implied that the "critics" Bouazza speaks about have created a literary climate that is as suffocating as the one brought about by the moralists that were attacked by Willem Kloos *cum suis* – while Bouazza, by implication, is positioned as an author with a grandeur similar to that of the famous members of the Eighties Movement.

What Bouazza presents here as suffocating is the same thing that Salman Rushdie, in a critical essay on "Commonwealth Literature", called the "bogy of authenticity": i.e. the demand that the style and themes of a non-Western author must represent his or her 'alien' background[38] – resulting in what could be called an *othering* of the foreign author. Thus, Bouazza is adopting a *posture* that by this time was on its way to becoming as current as the stereotyped notion of the 'exotic migrant author', i.e. that of the author fighting this very stereotype. In this light we can make sense of Bouazza reproaching his critics for something very few – if any – of them have actually done:

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34 Cf. Henriëtte Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007): 46.

35 Ibidem.

36 "[M]odel [...] van literaire vernieuwing". Erica van Boven, "In de schaduw van Tachtig. Doorwerking van de Beweging van Tachtig in de 20ste-eeuwse literatuurgeschiedschrijving" (2007): 39.

37 "[D]omineedichters"; "een literaire revolutie, een culturele revolutie, een omwenteling, een verjongingskuur". Ibidem: 46.

38 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (1990): 67. Also, cf. the introduction to this study, p. 12.

> Hoe zorgzaam de omgeving ook is, de ruimte die de [Nederlandse schrijver met Marokkaanse Achtergrond en Nederlandse Nationaliteit] meestal toegewezen krijgt, is nogal beperkt. […]. Vanwege zijn specifieke sociale plaats binnen een dominante cultuur lijkt [de migrant-schrijver] voorbeschikt – of gedoemd – om zijn positie, 'het migrantenthema', tot de drijvende kracht achter zijn schrijverschap te maken. […] Elk ander onderwerp dat de migrant-schrijver kiest, zal door de lezers gezien worden als een moedwillige afwijking van de opgedrongen thematiek, namelijk de situatie van de immigrant, of een slinkse versluiering van dat thema.[39]
>
> No matter how caring his surroundings may be, the space that is usually assigned to the [Dutch author with Moroccan background and Dutch nationality] is quite limited. [...] Because of his specific social place within a dominant culture [the migrant author] is meant – or doomed – to make his position, 'the migrant theme', the driving force behind his authorship. [...] Any other subject the migrant author might choose will be seen by his readers as a wilful deviation of the coerced themes, that is, the immigrant's conditions, or a cunning veiling of that theme.

That is not too say that Bouazza was not at all confronted with this kind of prejudice. It is, however, clear that the notion of him being exoticised has been an important element of Bouazza's *posture* since the very beginning, even though we can hardly say this really happened much.

In this light we can also make sense of the fictional passages in *A Bear in Fur Coat* where "a flamboyant lady" appears "with pinned up hair and colourfully draped scarves, in a black dress with an endless split".[40] This woman, which Bouazza and his alter ego Haaris Boelfachr call Madam Split, personifies the exoticising coercion of authenticity. Bouazza has her saying things such as: "It must be delightful to live in-between cultures! Look, I'm all dressed up in style for the guest of honour. [...] The scarves are from Egypt, the beads from Yemen and the earrings from Turkey". [41] To which the fictional migrant author Haaris Boelfachr wryly answers: "Thrice wrong, the split is right. Our guest of honour is of Moroccan descent, as has been announced".[42] What Bouazza seems to want to point out here is the notion that it is bad enough that the "migrant author" is being reduced to his decent, but what is more, his presumed authenticity stems from a fantasy image rather than any true knowledge of his culture of origin. This is a point that Bouazza has made before. In an afterword to his col-

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39 Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 11-12.

40 "[E]en flamboyante dame met opgestoken haar en kleurige gedrapeerde sjaaltjes, in een zwarte jurk met een oneindige split". Ibidem: 15.

41 "Het moet heerlijk zijn om tussen twee culturen te leven! Kijk, ik heb mij helemaal in stijl gekleed voor de eregast. […] De sjaaltjes komen uit Egypte, de kralen uit Jemen en de oorbellen uit Turkije". Ibidem: 31.

42 "Drie keer mis, de split is raak. Onze eregast is van Marokkaanse afkomst, zoals [...] is omgeroepen". Ibidem.

lection of translations of medieval Arab love poetry, he spoke, for instance, of the "sweetening of what is being called Arab culture": a "romanticising" which obscures the explicitly sexual – even pornographic – nature of Arab poetry.

Bouazza links this in his work with what I called a leitmotif at the outset of this chapter: the "delusions of the eye". In one of the more essay-like passages of *A Bear in Fur Coat*, he tells an anecdote about a "famous newspaper" that asked him to write comments for pictures of Dutch people in their kitchen. He claims that he was asked to do so because the editorial staff assumed he had a special way of looking at the Netherlands: "One could imagine (this is how it was phrased and indeed, what insight speaks from this phrasing) [...] that a Dutch kitchen has a certain exotic quality for me [...], because I look at it, after all, with an alien gaze".[43] The author plays on the double meaning of the word 'imagine' here. In this context, to say that "one could imagine" something, of course, means that it is presumably possible. However, the insight of which this word testifies – despite, rather than because of the editorial staff, which the author presents as quite silly – is that such a notion of the exotic migrant is an imagination. Bouazza then proceeds to create a certain irony by suggesting that precisely those who themselves cannot see the "migrant author" for who he or she really is because of their exotism seem to think that it is the migrant whose gaze is deluded: "I imagine an alien gaze to be an eye with pupils in which the magical scenes, beheld in the womb country, still continue to shine and in which the current surroundings are obscured by the shades (and the heart by the twinkling) of the past".[44]

Here, Bouazza's reflections on what it means to be a "migrant author" form an interesting counterpoint to what authors like Salman Rushdie and theoreticians like Homi K. Bhabha have proposed. Their notion that the migrant's unique position provides "new angles" from which reality can be represented (Rushdie) or enables him or her to create "new signs of identity" (Bhabha) is strongly rejected by Bouazza.[45] Furthermore, as he says in a 2000 interview: "I

43 "Het was voorstelbaar (zo werd dat gezegd en wat een inzicht spreekt uit deze formulering) […] dat een Nederlandse keuken voor mij iets exotisch heeft […], omdat ik er toch met een uitheemse blik naar kijk". Ibidem: 13.

44 "Bij een uitheemse blik stel ik mij een oog voor met pupillen waarin de magische taferelen, aanschouwd in het baarmoederland, nog naschijnen en waarin de huidige omgeving omfloerst wordt met de tinten (en het hart met de tintelingen) van het verleden". Ibidem.

45 Cf. chapter 3, p. 46 and Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (1994): 15. It needs to be pointed out that Rushdie's position in this essay is rather ambiguous. Like Bouazza, Rushdie claims that "literature is self-validating. That is to say, a book is not justified by

hate authors who pride themselves on being Jewish, Black or Moroccan".[46] In this light, Bouazza's Book Week Essay has a certain polemic quality, because the "alien gaze" that Bouazza so strongly dismisses is strikingly reminiscent of the way of looking that Kader Abdolah has described as the driving force behind his literary work in several interviews:

> In a miraculous way my head takes a piece of the past and juxtaposes it with the present. I see a large Dutch cow and my head picks up an old Iranian woman, placing her next to the cow. Or I walk along [Dutch river] the IJssel and my head lets the Sefidgani, the river of my youth, flow through its banks. This just happens.[47]

When we read such a remark by this popular author, it is striking to see how strongly Bouazza ridicules the "alien gaze":

> Voorzover ik weet vertoon ik […] deze afwijking niet. Mijn huidige omgeving dringt wel degelijk tot mij door en is mij zelfs vertrouwd geworden. […] dat ik met mond open van verbazing en ogen scheel van verwondering rondloop als een holenmens in een grachtenpand, is nog niemand opgevallen.
>
> As far as I know, I have not shown [...] symptoms of this defect. My current surroundings do get through and have even become familiar for me. [...] so far, no one has noted that I walk around with my mouth open in surprise and cross-eyed by amazement, like a caveman in a canal house.[48]

The "canal house" does not merely refer to the typical kind of houses found in the canal area ('grachtengordel') in central Amsterdam, so beloved by tourists. The Dutch word "grachtenpand" also carries the strong connotation of elitist and so-called progressive, based on the assumption that this neighbourhood is populated by a culturally refined, leftist elite. In this passage, the "alien gaze" is presented as a handicap, and the person who suffers from it as backwards. Although Abdolah is not mentioned by name here, this passage does testify of a certain

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its author's worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written. There are terrible books that arise directly out of experience".

46 "Ik heb een hekel aan auteurs die zich laten voorstaan op hun jood, neger, of Marokkaan zijn". Geciteerd in Ingrid Hoogervorst, *Geletterde mannen* (2000): 101.

47 "Op een wonderlijke manier pakt mijn hoofd een stukje van het verleden en zet dat naast het heden. Ik zie een grote Hollandse koe en mijn hoofd haalt er een oude Iraanse vrouw bij die haar naast de koe laat staan [sic]. Of ik loop langs de IJssel en mijn hoofd laat de Sefiedgani, de rivier van mijn kindertijd, door de bedding van de IJssel stromen. Dat gebeurt gewoon". Cited in Taco van der Mark, no title (1997).

48 Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 13-14. Apart from the ideological attack on those who, according to Bouazza, reduce the author with their "ethnic courtesy", this passage is also a playful reference to the novel *De sirkelbewoners* by Sybren Polet, in which Kiko, one of the characters, actually is a caveman living in a canal house. Cf. Sybren Polet, *De sirkelbewoners* (1970).

contempt for the way in which authors such as him (and in the contemporary Dutch literary field, Abdolah really is the only author of name who has significantly prided himself on his descent) position themselves as exotic writer with an "alien" outlook on all things Dutch.

Thus, we can observe that Bouazza's aim is not an emancipation of authors of a migrant descent. He does not fight a presumed marginalisation of migrant authors, which is, again, a significant difference with Kader Abdolah. The latter wrote the following in a column about Abdelkader Benali receiving the 2003 Libris Literature Prize: "the guardians of the white elite have always used cheap tricks to label their books as 'foreign literature'".[49] Bouazza denies that Dutch literature has been caught in the grip of such an oppression: "I am not suggesting that an evil plot has been hatched by the 'powers that be' who govern Dutch literature", as he writes in *A Bear in Fur Coat*.[50] In his column, Abdolah claims that the "honour" of Benali's Libris Literature Prize rightfully belongs to "all migrant authors" and can be seen as a first step towards the emancipation of this group.[51] Bouazza distances himself from this group forming too. As early as 1996 he wrote sarcastically about other writing "allochtones": "one of those writers, a nineteen year old Moroccan girl, said to me that she likes to write about 'our beautiful culture' [...] and I answered that I preferred not to share my bath, which I have carefully run and heated".[52] Again, we can recognise a strategic positioning in which the author carefully assumes the *posture* of an individualist author with an autonomist conception of literature. To foreground this *posture*, Bouazza does not only contrast it with silly Dutch exoticisation of the "migrant author", but also with the just as silly 'self-exoticising' of foreign "writers".

49 "[D]e bewakers van de blanke elite hebben altijd geprobeerd om hun boeken met goedkope trucjes als 'allochtonenliteratuur' te bestempelen". Kader Abdolah, *Karavaan* (20003): 232. This remark is, of course, rather strange coming from Abdolah, who has himself always presented his work as "foreign literature".

50 "Hier wordt niet gesuggereerd dat er een kwaadaardig complot gesmeed wordt door de 'machten' die de Nederlandse literatuur regeren". Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 11.

51 "[A]lle migrantenschrijvers". Kader Abdolah, *Karavaan* (20003): 232.

52 "Een van die schrijvelaars, een Marokkaans meisje van negentien jaar, zei tegen mij dat ze graag schrijft over 'onze mooie cultuur' […] en ik antwoordde dat ik mijn bad, dat ik met veel zorg heb laten vollopen en op temperatuur heb gebracht, niet graag deel". Hafid Bouazza, "Allochtonen met een stem" (1996): 22.

3.2. The dangers of Islam and cultural relativism

It is important to note that Bouazza does not deny the existence of an "alien gaze": indeed, the notion that several foreign authors 'suffer' from this condition and that he himself does not plays an important role in his *posture*. Moreover, there is a paradox in the way the author talks about Muslim and Arab culture. While he vehemently attacks the notion of authenticity on the one hand, he often deplores the fact that the Dutch have lost sight of what is truly Muslim or Arab on the other. According to the author, cultural relativism has made it impossible for the Dutch to realise that there is a vicious side to the culture of Muslims in the Netherlands.

In this light, it is interesting to compare the 2001 Book Week Essay with the revised edition of *A Bear in Fur Coat* published in 2004. In an added passage, Bouazza wrote how Muslim migrants in the Netherlands would like to turn their kitchens into "segregated bastions for their wives".[53] He now concludes that the suspicion that he might have an "alien gaze" is not so much the fault of the silly editorial staff of the "famous newspaper". Rather, his fellow migrants are to blame: "Maybe my scorn at the time was a bit too premature, because I have learned in the meantime that a kitchen certainly remains rather unexplored to the Moroccan gaze".[54] In the revised edition of *A Bear in Fur Coat*, Bouazza links the reception of 'foreign' authors much more clearly to the way Muslims are dealt with in Dutch society than he did in the original Book Week Essay. The 2004 version contains a large amount of social commentary. To the passage about how the author of foreign origins is "doomed" to always remain first and foremost a *migrant* author, he adds for instance:

> Dit is overigens hetzelfde mechanisme dat we nu zien in de hele discussie over integratie of integratie met behoud van eigen cultuur, zowel bij de nieuwkomers als bij de oorspronkelijke bewoners hier. Niet alleen de immigrant is nieuw voor het nieuwe land, maar ook vice versa. En zo houden beiden elkaar in een wurggreep.[55]
>
> This, by the way, is the same mechanism that we can now see in the whole debate about integration or integration with preservation of one's culture, both among newcomers and among the original inhabitants. The immigrant is not only new for the new country, but the same holds true vice versa. Thus, both keep each other in a stranglehold.

53 "[A]parte bastions voor de vrouwen". Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas. Autobiografische schetsen* (2004): 19.

54 "Misschien was mijn hoon toentertijd wat al te voorbarig, want ondertussen weet ik dat een keuken voor een Marokkaanse blik zeker iets onontgonnens heeft". Ibidem.

55 Ibidem: 17.

Thus, rather than explaining the inconveniences for the so-called 'foreign' author, Bouazza now focuses on the societal consequences of the "alien gaze" and its opposite, the 'exoticising gaze' of someone like Madam Split. This changes the tone of the essay significantly. While the first edition of *A Bear in Fur Coat* was an attack on the exotism of Dutch critics and readers, the second edition is largely a charge against Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands.

The essay now corresponds closely to the op-eds that Bouazza published in the years following the publication of the first edition. In 2002, for instance, he wrote:

> What is the use of the absurd debate on whether The Netherlands is or is not a multicultural country, while the seams of society are showing tears and one part of the population is a stranger to the other?
>
> Dialogue and approach are only possible (we do not have to become best friends) when Islam accepts that it no longer needs the image of the Western enemy to stress its own distinctive political and cultural features.[56]

Bouazza is reproaching Muslims for very much the same thing as what he reproached his critics and readers for in *A Bear in Fur Coat*: making the Other into an alien by making him disappear behind a pre-existing stereotyped image.

On the societal level as well, this *image*-ination is mutual, as can be concluded from the title of another 2002 op-ed: "The Netherlands is *blind* to Muslim extremism".[57] This refers to the

> blindness and unwillingness of the Dutch to see these tumours for what they truly are, namely what is called extreme right-wing in the Netherlands. [...] And as long as the Netherlands is not taking this seriously and keeps on jabbering blissfully about 'their culture', I will take a gloomy view of things. [...] The Dutch will have to [...] learn to see people instead of Muslims and to see opinions instead of an untouchable religion or cute culture.[58]

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56 "Waartoe leidt de onzinnige discussie of Nederland al dan niet een multicultureel land is, terwijl de naden van de samenleving scheuren vertonen en het ene deel van de bevolking een vreemde is voor het andere? Dialoog en toenadering zijn alleen mogelijk (beste vrienden hoeven we niet te worden) als de islam kan accepteren dat het beeld van de westelijke vijand niet meer noodzakelijk is voor de eigen politieke en culturele profilering". Hafid Bouazza, "Moslims kwetsen Nederland" (2002).

57 Hafid Bouazza, "Nederland is blind voor moslimextremisme" (2002).

58 "Al jaren maak ik me grote zorgen over [...] de blindheid en onwil van de Nederlanders om deze gezwellen aan te zien voor wat ze werkelijk zijn, namelijk wat in Nederland rechts-extremisme wordt genoemd. […] En zolang Nederland dit niet serieus neemt en verzaligd blijft doorpruttelen over 'hun cultuur' zie ik het bijzonder somber in. […] Nederlanders moeten […] leren mensen te zien in plaats van moslims en opvattingen in plaats van een onaantastbare religie of schattige cultuur". Ibidem.

Thus, Bouazza observes the same "sweetening" of the Other's culture in society as in literature. And as in the case of Arab love poetry, the result is an obscuring of the true – in this case rather grim – nature of that which is being romanticised.

It is clear that the above quote is meant as a jab at cultural relativism, that is, the notion that one should not judge other people's cultural peculiarities as inferior to one's own culture. Bouazza will have none of it, not only because it makes a rejection of "Islam's extremist excesses" impossible, but also because it is just another form of oppression of the Other:

> This other culture for which the cultural relativists show so much respect, is viewed with much contempt by those same cultural relativists. [...] Therefore: if one thinks things through a bit, it is an outrageous kind of paternalism, because the morals and customs of the other are viewed as funny folklore. The more old traditions they think they can discern in this, the more cultural relativists will lick their lips while talking about it. In the end, it all serves to glorify themselves.[59]

All this seems to be very similar to the dynamics that dominate Dutch literature according to Bouazza. The backwardness of Muslims is being cultivated by Dutch cultural relativists, just like the "migrant author" was turned into a "caveman in a canal house". And just like there are 'foreign' authors who cherish the handicap of an "alien gaze", there are Muslims in Dutch society who demand a "special treatment" because of their "culture". Bouazza regularly mentions the oppression of women in Islam as an example: when the Dutch decide to take measures against them, Muslims will inevitably start to "complain that we want to harm or even take away their culture".[60] It is, however, precisely this appeal to culture that lies at the root of the problems concerning the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands. Too often it is used to defend the undefendable, according to Bouazza: "Culture [...] is subject to influences and it is therefore variable [...], but nowadays it means gastronomic diversity and burying women in the house or underneath textile".[61]

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59 "Die andere cultuur waarvoor cultuurrelativisten zoveel respect betonen, wordt door diezelfde cultuurrelativisten vol dédain bekeken. […] Daarom: als je even doordenkt is het van een ongehoord paternalisme, want in feite worden de zeden en gewoonten van de ander als leuke folklore gezien. Hoe meer oude tradities ze erin menen te ontwaren, hoe verlekkerder cultuurrelativisten erover praten. Het dient uiteindelijk ter meerdere glorie van henzelf". Geciteerd in Harm Visser, *Leven zonder God. Elf interviews over ongeloof* (2003): 20.

60 "Zij zullen klagen dat wij hun cultuur willen aantasten of zelfs afpakken". Hafid Bouazza, "Demonstreer voor vrijheid moslima's" (2003).

61 Cultuur is […] aan invloeden onderhevig is en dus veranderlijk […], maar tegenwoordig staat het voor gastronomische verscheidenheid en het begraven van vrouwen in huis of onder textiel". Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas. Autobiografische schetsen* (2004): 17-18.

Thus, Bouazza indeed sketches a situation of a mutual "stranglehold" in his op-eds and essays. On the one hand, there are the Dutch, of which the majority practices an unhealthy and hypocritical cultural relativism, if Bouazza's writings are to be believed. On the other hand, there are the Muslims who have fetishised their own culture – a rather nasty culture, according to the author. Both ensure that the Muslim remains a stranger to Dutch society and the Dutchman remains a stranger to the Muslim. The sarcastic tone that the author uses while discussing these issues enables the author to position himself as aloof, as an individualist who distances himself both from the Muslims who want to make themselves into an Other and from the Dutch who exoticise them.

3.3. A decadent *posture*

As mentioned before, the way in which Bouazza presents 'the Dutch' and 'the Muslims' is remarkable in the light of his attack on stereotypes. In his op-eds and interviews, he himself uses stereotypes by the dozen. Thus, on the one hand there is the author's resistance to exotism and Orientalism, which turn authors of Muslim descent into barbarians. On the other hand, he himself presents Muslims as barbarians, who for instance resist the emancipation of women "gruntingly" or with "roars and shrieks".[62] In one of his op-eds he describes a "priceless photograph" accompanying a newspaper article about demonstrations in Morocco against the introduction of women's right to divorce:

> In the foreground a whitebearded man called attention to himself, in the classic pose of Arab indignation – open mouth, uvula visible, hands against his temples, rocking head. The poor greybeard must have been cursed with nine daughters. And in Dutch mosques, Muslims were grunting disapprovingly as well.[63]

Phrased like this, this uncanny show of emotions derives its almost grotesque character from the fact that this is not just any kind of indignation, but "*Arab* indignation". The Arab is described in a stereotyped way: impossible to reason with, fanatic, with an endless host of children. Such a use of Western stereotypes can also be found in Bouazza's annotation of his translations of classic Arabic erotica in *Round for Round or Like a Pickaxe*. The author sounds like an old-fashioned Orientalist when he writes footnotes like: "Arabs believed (and believe) that a woman's libido is nine times stronger than that of a man" and "Ar-

62 "[G]rommend"; "gebrul en gekrijs". Hafid Bouazza, "Demonstreer voor vrijheid moslima's" (2003).

63 Op de voorgrond trok een witbebaarde man de aandacht, in de klassieke houding van Arabische verontwaardiging – mond open, huig zichtbaar, handen tegen de slapen, deinend hoofd. De arme grijsaard moet vervloekt zijn geweest met negen dochters. En ook moslims in Nederlandse moskeeën gromden afkeurend.

abs preferred a tight vulva and a dry vagina".[64] And in the afterword for *Beautiful in Every Eye is That Which it Loves* mentioned before, he contrasts the contemporary "sweetening" of Arab culture with "the over-eroticising [...] of the Arab world" by nineteenth century Orientalists.[65] Bouazza claims that "the latter movement, albeit also in a distorting manner, [...] did understand one thing: that Arabs conceived of love as a first and foremost physical phenomenon and the repercussions of that can be found in the love poetry".[66]

A possible explanation for the discrepancy between sweeping statements such as the ones cited above and Bouazza's protests against stereotypes could be the ironic character of his texts. Bouazza's footnotes for Arabic erotica, for instance, can be read as the work of an Orientalist, but also as an ironic representation of the Orientalist discourse, with presumably timeless truths about 'the' Arabs, delivered in a pompous tone and all. Similarly, a corny phrase such as "[t]he poor greybeard" creates the "ironic tone of voice" that, according to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, allows authors to "mention" but not necessarily "use" opinions. Thus, according to Sperber and Wilson, a certain ambiguity is created: in the case of an ironic utterance, the reader cannot know for certain whether the author or speaker takes (full) responsibility for what is being said.[67]

As the examples cited above show, Bouazza is certainly not aiming for the classic type of rhetoric irony, a figure of speech in which the exact opposite of what is being said is meant. Rather, Bouazza's ironic tone of voice is reminiscent of romantic irony, in which such a positive outcome is lacking: "romantic irony undermines all positions insofar as they are positive, final, and limited".[68] Hegel has said of romantic irony that it is "symptomatic for a self-congratulatory ego", testifying of "a frivolous attitude that destroy[s] all seriousness by undermining every possibility to commit and communicate".[69] It could be argued that this criticism holds true for Bouazza as well – the question remains, however, whether the author himself would see this as particularly negative. After all, this figure of speech (which could also be called postmodern irony, of the kind we

64 "Arabieren geloofden (en geloven) dat het libido van een vrouw negen keer zo sterk is als dat van een man"; "Arabieren gaven de voorkeur aan een nauwe vulva en een droge vagina". Hafid Bouazza, *Rond voor rond of als een pikhouweel* (2002): 64, 65.

65 "[D]e overerotisering […] van de Arabische wereld". Hafid Bouazza, *Schoon in elk oog is wat het bemint* (2000): 55-56.

66 "Deze laatste stroming, hoewel ook vertekend, had één ding wel begrepen: dat Arabieren liefde vooral zagen als een fysiek fenomeen en de weerslag daarvan is te vinden in de liefdespoëzie". Ibidem.

67 Cf. chapter 2, p. 30.

68 Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (2002): 83.

69 Ibidem: 84.

can also find in authors such as Dave Eggers, Michel Houellebecq and Arnon Grunberg) certainly fits his decadent *posture*.

In this *posture*, we can discern the influences of nineteenth century aestheticists as well. I have already mentioned the Dutch Eighties Movement, and another considerable influence is their contemporary Oscar Wilde. Bouazza clearly feels attracted to his conception of literature: some passages from *A Bear in Fur Coat* correspondent so closely to Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" that one could speak of paraphrasing. Take for instance a dialogue between Haaris Boelfachr and a member of his audience when he gives a speech on the link between literature and the author's descent. Boelfachr replies to the comment that "a book that is set in Lapland teaches us something about the soul of a Lap"[70] by saying: "In literature your Lap is as representative for Lapland as Santa Claus is for the North Pole. The writer's literary disposition is expressed in his style, his mentality in language".[71] Here, we can recognise the words used in the dialogue in "The Decay of Lying" that refute the suggestion that "Art expresses the temper of its age, the spirit of its time": "Now do you really believe that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? […] The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists […]. The Japanese people are […] simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art".[72]

An important difference between Oscar Wilde and Hafid Bouazza is the fact that Wilde avoids using the word 'imagination' (because of its Romantic connotations) and talks about lying instead. But although Bouazza places himself decidedly in a Romantic tradition with his emphasis on imagination, many of his poetical comments are reminiscent of Wilde's praise for, as one of his biographers have phrased it, "art's rejection of sincerity and accuracy in favour of lies and masks".[73] This cannot only be discerned in the argument set forward in *A Bear in Fur Coat*, but also in the form of this Book Week Essay. As noted before, the genres of autobiography and essay strongly suggest authenticity and sincerity. This is entirely disrupted, however, through the fictional embedment of autobiographical and essayistic passages. All this reminds of Abdelkader Benali's similar fascination for lies, masks and fantasy and the way these enable literature and acting to be a kind of "refuge". While Kader Abdolah presented

70 "U kunt toch niet ontkennen dat een boek dat zich afspeelt in Lapland ons iets leert over de ziel van een lap?" *Hafid Bouazza, Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 35.

71 "In de literatuur is uw Lap net zo representatief voor Lapland als de kerstman voor de Noordpool. Het literaire temperament van de schrijver komt tot uiting in de stijl, zijn mentaliteit in de taal". Ibidem.

72 Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" (2007 [1891]): 97-98.

73 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (1987): 285.

authenticity as a source of his literary work that cannot be tampered with, stemming from a centuries old "tradition", Benali and Bouazza merely treat it as one of the possible masks – or even lies – that the ('foreign') author has at his disposal to confuse and escape the story that others have made up about him.

With Bouazza, even more so than with Benali, this often means the author is writing or speaking in bad faith: he deliberately leaves it unclear whether he embraces or exposes the stereotypes he is mentioning. As early as 1996 the author was clearly conscious of the suggestion carried by his background and the 'exotic' elements in his work. As he says in an interview:

> In one [...] story [in *Abdullah's Feet*], the author has a character consider the difficulty of writing an autobiography, because as a Muslim one could lose one's soul by doing so. 'Then readers ask: 'Is that really true?' People are continuously looking for human interest; they're like children who want to believe that fairy tales are true [...].'[74]

As I noted earlier, the author seems to relish (and sometimes exaggerate) the notion that his readers and critics are "like children" at least as much as he is irate about it. After all, it is precisely this misconception of him and his work that is a driving force behind much of his work, both stylistically and thematically. Bouazza himself writes as much towards the end of *A Bear in Fur Coat*. After having referred to Ali Baba and Aladdin throughout the entire essay, giving his essay a decidedly exotic flavour, he suddenly halts and writes: "the cave of the forty thieves [...], Aladdin's lamp and the flying carpet do not have their origin in Arabian texts. They are made up by the European translators of this work".[75] In other words, the presumed exotic nature of his work is, in the end, very Western. The reader is tricked, much like Madam Split who interrupts Haaris Boelfachr's speech crying: "What fantasy! I feel all light in my tummy when I fly with you on your flying carpet. That's what I miss in the Netherlands, that fairy-tale beauty".[76] What she – and according to Bouazza, many of his

74 "In een […] verhaal [uit De voeten van Abdullah] laat de schrijver een personage de overweging maken hoe moeilijk het is een autobiografisch verhaal te schrijven, omdat je daardoor als islammiet [sic] je ziel kan verliezen. 'Is dat echt zo, vragen de lezers dan. De mensen zoeken steeds naar human interest; ze zijn als kinderen die willen geloven dat sprookjes waar zijn […].'" Paraphrased and cited in Peter Jacobs, "De kunst van het misverstand" (1996).

75 "[D]e grot van de veertig rovers […], de wonderlamp van Aladdin en het vliegende tapijt hebben hun oorsprong niet in de Arabische werken. Zij zijn verzinsels van de Europese vervalsers van dat werk". Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 52-53. Indeed, both *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* are not included in any of the original manuscripts of the *Arabian Nights*.

76 "Wat een fantasie! Ik voel me helemaal licht worden in mijn buik als ik meevlieg op uw vliegend tapijt. Dat mis ik toch hier in Nederland, de sprookjesachtigheid". Ibidem: 38.

readers – does not realise is that much of this "fairy-tale beauty" is actually very Dutch.

In the light of this 'tricking' of the reader, it can be understood why Bouazza cries out after having revealed the 'true' (i.e. *false*) nature of the 'Arabian' fairy tales in *A Bear in Fur Coat*: "Madam Split, we love you. You are indispensable". The exotist *image*-ination of the Arab Other is, indeed, an indispensable artistic technique in Bouazza's work, where its aesthetic quality is foregrounded while it is also made part of an ironic play with stereotypes and reader expectations. This explains the striking paradox between Bouazza's poetical statements in his Book Week Essay and his own literary work. In *A Bear in Fur Coat* he complains: "Behind every palm tree in their [migrant writers] work an oasis of homesickness is presumed, every carpet is suspected of being a flying vehicle".[77] At the same time, his stories are chock-full of palm trees, homesickness and flying carpets. What is going on here – and rather blatantly, especially for those who have read Bouazza's 'complaints' about readers who behave "like children" – is a mimicking of a Western tradition of exoticising, of Orientalism.

Read in this way, one of the aims of *A Bear in Fur Coat* is to provide a kind of reading guide for his work: Madam Split is offered as a negative example of how not to read Bouazza's stories. Those readers who want to avoid being as silly as her must be willing to go along with Bouazza's ironic play of lies and masks. Comments about readers behaving "like children" – the targets of Bouazza's irony and satire – are meant to strengthen the "interpretative community", as Stanley Fish would call it, that the author is attempting to create for his work here.[78] This is, as I mentioned in the last chapter, one of irony's important functions. Bouazza invites his readers, as it were, to distance themselves from the foolishness of society and the literary field, just like the author has done, and to retreat into a superior – and elitist – individualism.

Bouazza creates a satire of the way in which "the original inhabitants" and "newcomers" treat each other in his op-eds, essays and interviews about literature and society, with a parade of backwards migrants, naive or nasty cultural relativists, silly critics and handicapped migrants authors. The "alien" and exoticising gazes with which they look at each other are clearly mirror images that they have of each other in this satire. This has been part of his literary project since his debut, as can be observed in a 1998 interview:

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77 Ibidem: 32.

78 "Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies". Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum" (1998 [1976]): 989.

> The conceptualisation of Muslims by Europeans and Europeans by Muslims – it seems like it can't be broken. [...] In Western culture there is still something of what nineteenth century Orientalists saw as characteristic for Arab culture, which was sex, cruelty and mysticism. Then I thought, I will turn the tables on that [in the short story "Apollien"]. Now I will show how a Moroccan attributes sex, cruelty and mysticism to Western women.[79]

Thus, it becomes clear that Bouazza in no way attempts to negate the "delusions of the eye": he even goes as far as suggesting that this is impossible. The ultimate aim of his ironic citing of exotist discourses is therefore not to unmask them. After all, the 'mask' that readers like Madam Split hand him is "indispensable" for his literary project. If there is anything unmasked in Bouazza's work, it is the notion that there could be anything beyond mutual *image*-ination when dealing with an Other.

4. The imagined Other in Bouazza's literary work

Bouazza's societal criticism can be recognised in his stories about encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim characters. Dutch society is represented in a caricatured way, often using intimate relationships: strange and backwards 'Muslims' living together as lovers or housemates with pedantic, exotist 'Dutchmen'. With their grotesque and estranging tone and failed relationships, these stories can be read as a satire of society. The reader is invited to read these as such through blatant references to the public debate. Linda Hutcheon has noted about satire that it "frequently turns to irony as a means of ridiculing – and implicitly correcting – the vices and follies of humankind". In satire, more than anywhere else, irony is brought to a head: the aim is to attack what is represented and present it as abject.[80] This can be observed in Bouazza's literary work. In his caricatured characters, we can recognise the Muslims and cultural relativists keeping one another in a "stranglehold". Despite the loud protests of an autonomist conception of literature, these stories do testify of an involvement with social and cultural problems – that is to say, they testify of engagement.

A certain involvement has been pointed out before in other studies of Bouazza's work. The conclusion has often been drawn that Bouazza's literary

79 "De conceptualisering van moslims door Europeanen en Europeanen door moslims – het lijkt wel alsof die niet te doorbreken is. […] Nog steeds is in het westen iets aanwezig van wat negentiende-eeuwse oriëntalisten als karakteristiek zagen voor de Arabische cultuur, dat was seks, wreedheid en mystiek. Toen dacht ik, dat draai ik [in het korte verhaal "Apollien"] om. Nu laat ik zien hoe een Marokkaan seks, wreedheid en mystiek toedicht aan westerse vrouwfiguren". Geciteerd in Willem Kuipers, "'Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver'" (1998).

80 Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge* (1994): 52-53.

work must be read as attempts at emancipation. I have mentioned Henriëtte Louwerse, who has interpreted *Salomon* as a reaction to the growing aversion to cultural relativism and the multicultural society in the Netherlands. According to Louwerse, Bouazza contrasts the resulting all-too-arrogant foregrounding of a Dutch cultural identity with a world of hybrids and change in his novel.[81] And according to Ieme van der Poel, Bouazza has "what has been called a *surconscience linguistique*", which enables him to break loose from a marginal position in the Dutch literary field using his "precious use of language".[82] In other words, according to these authors Bouazza's work has been written from a minority perspective and, as such, it is a challenge to the language and Grand Narrative that come with the majority perspective.

Despite the fact that I agree with much of what Van Der Poel and Louwerse have written about Bouazza, I find it highly problematic to label Bouazza's work as an expression of the urge to emancipate. It may very well be that Bouazza's "precious use of language" can be linked to his descent, but he had already used it in his debut, which was written before he had any position in the literary field. And from the moment that the author received a position in the literary field this position has never been marginal.[83] The notion that Bouazza attacks the rise of monoculturalism in Dutch society seems too much of a one-sided interpretation of his literary work as well. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss how it is precisely the notion that there is a need for emancipation – the notion that 'the' Muslim or Moroccan is marginalised and therefore needs to be liberated – that is disrupted in Bouazza's work. We can observe this, for example, when we compare Bouazza's work with that of a migrant writer like Salman Rushdie, which I will do in Section 3.1.

I will propose a reading of Bouazza's work that takes his contributions to the public and literary debate into account. With that I do not mean that I want to reduce his literary texts to veiled social or poetical statements. What I would claim, though, is that the same ethos is implied in the texts that Bouazza has written in different genres (e.g. novels, short stories, op-eds, essays, introductions to collections of poetry): the author distances himself from the society that he sarcastically represents as doomed by its own foolishness. The *posture* that speaks from all of these texts is decidedly elitist. In his work, there is a constant disruption of what can be called a myth of the Dutch oppression of 'the' Muslim. However, as Liesbeth Minnaard remarks in *New Germans, New Dutch*

81 Henriëtte Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007): 161-171.

82 Ieme van der Poel, "Literatuur-met-een-accent" (2009):15-16.

83 Bouazza publishes with a prestigious publishing house (Prometheus); is extensively reviewed; and is often commissioned to translate Shakespeare for an important theatre company, write a Book Week Essay, edit anthologies, etc.

when discussing Louwerse's monograph on Bouazza's work, this disruption easily reads like anti-Islam propaganda: ""the question is, who actually notices or pays attention to [Bouazza's] skilful narrative performance of discursive dislocation, except for a reader as careful as Louwerse". In effect, Bouazza's work has become popular among the Dutch because they see their own prejudices on Islam confirmed, according to Minnaard.[84] Justified though Minnaard's criticism may be, Bouazza himself had already countered it when he said in 1998: "I am not the kind of person who worries whether something like that [i.e. descriptions of Muslim misogyny] has unpleasant societal consequences".[85]

That is not to say – despite the author's loudly protested attitude of indifference – that Bouazza's work does not aim to have a certain societal consequence. What is true is that Bouazza does not try to propagate a certain perspective, a certain truth. However, in line with what I have earlier called his Romantic irony, the author does attempt to subvert all truths: that of the minority perspective and that of the majority perspective, including the 'truth' that the meeting between the Islamic and the non-Islamic has created an oppressed minority that has to be liberated. As in the case of Abdelkader Benali, this evasive strategy has ethical implications and is therefore a kind of position-taking as well.

In my analyses of Bouazza's literary work, I will discuss how Bouazza brings about this subversion. Representations of the act of looking play an important role in this. "I can see myself in your eyes", the Dutch girlfriend of the Moroccan narrator says in the short story "Apolline" ("Apollien"). To which he adds: "I could see myself in her eyes too – foreshortened, *deformed*, no less puny than I always felt when I was with her".[86] This sums up all of the encounters between 'Muslim' and 'Dutch' characters in Bouazza's stories. As I will discuss in Section 4.1., in the synthetic sphere of meaning the author draws attention to the way in which 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' deform each other until they become clichés and stereotypes. He does so by stressing the unrealistic nature of his stories. For this he uses a number of styles and themes that foreground the impossibility of truly representing reality, such as exaggerated exotica and the grotesque. In Section 4.2., I will show how encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim characters function as a satiric staging of the same social issues that Bouazza has discussed in his op-eds in the thematic sphere of meaning. In this respect, Bouazza's work sometimes has the characteristics of a *roman à thèse*. When this is the case, the aesthetic play with imagination with which Bouazza

84 Liesbeth Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch* (2008): 125.

85 "Ik ben niet iemand die zich druk maakt of zoiets nare maatschappelijke gevolgen heeft". Cited in Willem Kuipers, "'Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver'" (1998).

86 Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): 101-102. Emphasis added.

contrasts the mutual "stranglehold" of *image*-ination is no longer free of engagement and hedonistic. Or, rather, the suggestion is (as with Benali) that the play can have an ethical and moral dimension precisely because it is hedonist and free of engagement: this offers 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' the possibility to draw closer to each other.

I will now discuss Bouazza's texts in which the encounter between the Islamic and non-Islamic plays an important role: *Abdullah's Feet*, of which especially the short story "Apolline" will be dealt with at length; *Apolline. A play* (*Apollien. Een toneelstuk*, 1998), the adaptation of that same story for the theatre by Bouazza; Bouazza's first novel *Salomon*; and his second novel *Paravion*. *Abdullah's Feet* is a collection of short stories which are mainly set in the fictional Moroccan village Bertollo. The stories are remarkable for their transgressive nature (paedophilia and bestiality are recurrent themes) and Bouazza's flowery style full of archaisms and neologisms. They form a certain unity and seem to be set in the same fictional world.[87] In "Apolline" the narrator emigrates to the Netherlands after having grown up in Bertollo. He starts a relationship with the Dutch Apolline, a woman that fascinates him endlessly, but seems to stir a certain horror in him as well. The relationship is doomed to failure and the narrator blames this on the fact that Apolline never respected his religion and culture. He ends up lonely, confused and obsessed with the pictures he took of her. In the play with the same title, Bouazza adds a number of characters to the story, most notably The Turk. This is a Dutchman who owes his nickname to the fact that he used to help immigrants, by offering them a place to sleep, for instance. However, he claims to be disappointed with his former friends, whom he accuses of deceit and lies, and every now and then he drops racist remarks. There are similarities between this Turk and the unnamed narrator that narrates the first two parts of the novel *Salomon*. Like The Turk, this man takes care of a Muslim immigrant by taking him into his house. However, his amused interest in his guest's exotic peculiarities turns into hatred and he ends up (literally) kicking this weird and intrusive man out of his house. In Bouazza's oeuvre, his second novel, *Paravion*, stands out as the work that most explicitly deals with the tensions between Muslim culture and Western culture. It is set in Morea, the Muslim country of descent of a group of migrants, and Paravion, the Western city to which they migrate. The group of boorish and vicious migrants hardly

87 Cf. note 9 in Henriette Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007): 88. Quite a few readers will probably assume that the I-narrator of these stories is the same, most notably readers of the 2002 ninth edition, of which the cover says so explicitly. Hafid Bouazza, De voeten van Abdullah (2002, ninth, revised edition). When studied closely, however, we see that this is not true. The stories clearly have narrators with different names and different positions in Bertollo.

adapt at all to their new country, which most clearly comes to the fore in their attitudes towards the Western women with whom they have short-lived love affairs. This novel is especially notable because a way out of the "stranglehold" is offered (a first in Bouazza's work): this is to be found in a blending of the mutual imagination of the Other, resulting in the kind of unity that before was only suggested in his stories.

4.1. Deformation in style and tropes

Bouazza's aesthetic play with imagination is meant to be both misleading and seducing. Misleading, because what seems to be 'Eastern' at first turns out not to be authentic at all, but an ironic citation of Orientalist discourses.[88] Seducing, because at the same time the reader is invited to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of those Orientalist discourses. On top of that, the aesthetic play creates a meta-level where the mechanisms of deception and seduction that accompany the *im-age*-ination of the Other are not just simply used, but also exposed. This results in mannered prose, with a hyperconscious use of images and language, which continuously draws the attention to itself. The 'false' authenticity of the descriptions of the 'mysterious East', but also the use of the grotesque, emphasise the deformation that necessarily comes with the act of representation – especially when the Other is represented.

In Section 4.1.1., I will analyse how Bouazza uses nineteenth century Orientalism as a literary template. The text certainly implies a 'silly' reader, who does not recognise the reading strategy that the author provides. This first implied reader is the target of a certain irony, established when a second implied reader recognises the knowing 'wink' that is established through the use of 'false' authenticity and 'gets it' (i.e. that we are dealing with deformation). In Section 4.1.2., I will discuss how Bouazza uses the grotesque and takes to extremes a process of *othering* that resembles the mutual "stranglehold" he observes in literature and society. The grotesque turns out to be very useful here, since (as Bakhtin has pointed out) it tends to disrupt strict hierarchies such as those between 'self' and 'other' with its emphasis on change and hybrids.[89] In Bouazza's stories, this characteristic of the grotesque helps to show how the encounter between the 'Islamic' and the 'Dutch' is defined by a deformation carried out by both the exoticising and the "alien" gaze.

88 In this respect, Louwerse speaks of "mockery of the reader". Henriëtte Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007): 130.

89 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world* (1984): 34.

4.1.1. Orientalism and exotism

In Bouazza's first novel, *Salomon*, the narrator says the flowing about his Muslim housemate: "Whatever the uneven earth from which [he] originated, in whichever tradition he was rooted, whichever religion he practiced, that knew so many superstitions and so many celebrations, it must have been an exuberant world".[90] This is certainly a description of the Eastern countries in which much of Bouazza's literary work is set: without exception, they are colourful and fairy-like, full of genies, miraculous transformations, slave markets and magic. In *Abdullah's Feet*, a boy changes into a tree and a village is destroyed by a jinn, while in *Paravion* the flying carpet is the main means of transport in the Arcadic country of origin.[91] Bouazza makes it clear that these exuberant worlds are *Muslim* worlds – part of their exuberance actually seems to lie in their blatantly Islamic nature. The characters continuously talk in Muslim filler such as "may Allah forgive you" or "may Satan not mislead us".[92] There is a focus on the 'strangeness' of the religious behaviour of the characters: "during his wife's pregnancy (a time during which a man is not permitted to lie with his wife)", a "brother-in-law" becomes "an ardent follower of the Maliki school, which offers a welcome alternative for the needs of men in times of frontal abstinence"; an imam attempts to exorcise a jinn in a well by reciting from the Koran; we read elaborate treatises on the ritual cleansing before prayer and their link to more scatological activities that has left the narrator of one of these stories "with a sexual obsession for women performing certain sanitary acts".[93] Bouazza presents the country of origin in a series of clichés, stressing things like jihad and the oppression of women. In the story "Abdullah's Feet", a boy's feet return from the "Holy War". The rest of his body has been obliterated, but he can still talk.[94] His family and townspeople treat him like a hero. And in *Paravion*, a boy calls the women with whom a marriage has been arranged for him "priceless", causing his father to cry out: "Priceless? Numbskull! Blockhead! […] The price of women and cattle can always be negotiated!"[95]

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90 "Uit welke oneffen grond Bileam ook was ontsproten, in welke traditie hij ook geworteld was, welke godsdienst hij ook beleed, die zo veel bijgeloof en zo veel vieringen kende, het moest een uitbundige wereld zijn". Hafid Bouazza, *Salomon* (2001): 114.

91 Hafid Bouazza, *Paravion*, pp. 31-33.

92 Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): passim.

93 Ibidem: 25; 73.

94 Ibidem: 19-30.

95 "Onbetaalbaar? Ezel, domkop! […] Over vee en vrouwen valt altijd te onderhandelen". Hafid Bouazza, Paravion (2003): 119.

These and other descriptions are reminiscent of the Orientalism of the Victorian age, notable for its fascination with the presumed perversion of the East. Reports, stories and images of that age tended to paint a picture where "everything about the Orient […] exuded dangerous sex, threatened hygiene and domestic seemliness with an excessive 'freedom of intercourse'", according to Edward Said.[96] Bouazza uses these clichéd representations of the Orient in scatological stories, full of precise descriptions of the "greenish phlegm" that the characters hawk up, the chopped off feet of a "martyr", a plague of flies".[97] The erotic peculiarities of this Islamic world – sodomy, paedophilia, incest, bestiality – are extensively described. Elderly women pleasure themselves (despite the express ban by the religious authorities) with eggplants and courgettes, while their men are praying in the mosque; an imam who teaches young boys to "memorize verses of the Koran" likes to seat them in his lap, their "memories ready for jostling by his quiet ecstasy"; and another pederast pretends to be piously "reading aloud from a pocket-sized Koran" while a boy sits "in the enclosure of his trousers, his sprayed knees".[98] The aim of all of this is clear (and has been discussed extensively by both Bouazza and his critics): by stressing the bizarre character of what once were accepted as accurate accounts of the Orient, the author exposes how the representation of the Other is always a matter of deformation – in a way that is here both offered as aesthetically valuable and as something that the reader is supposed to ironically distance him or herself from.

Yet, not all readers will recognise that they are dealing with parodies of Western misconceptions and fantasies when confronted with Bouazza's descriptions of the Orient as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences", as Said has phrased it in *Orientalism*.[99] In a review of *Abdullah's Feet* in local newspaper *Dagblad Tubantia*, we read, for instance: "Bouazza's memories of the village of his youth – assuming that we are dealing with a strongly autobiographical streak here – reveal an unexpectedly frank view of the inside of Muslim society".[100] This might be an extreme in-

96 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1994): 166-167. Said is partly citing Edward William Lane here.

97 Ibidem: 22; 28; 69-94.

98 Ibidem: 62; 34; 37

99 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1995): 1.

100 "Bouazza's herinneringen aan het dorp van zijn jeugd – aangenomen dat hier sprake is van een sterk autobiografische inslag – bieden een onverwacht openhartige inkijk in de islamitische samenleving". Theo Hakkert, "Hafid Boauzza verbrandt alle schepen achter zich" (1996). And in the article by Nico Dros that was mentioned in the introduction of this study, Dros writes: "In the stories in his debut collection of short stories, he brought to life the Mohammedan world of his Moroccan hinterland" ("In de verhalen uit zijn

stance, but there have probably been quite a few readers who, while not regarding the described events as realistic, do see these stories as 'authentically' Arabic or Oriental. Moreover, the overly stylised use of language, full of archaisms and neologisms have an effect that critic Jaap Goedegebuure has summed up as the "exotic quality of the far-fetched word".[101] In fact, just as in his Book Week Essay *A Bear in Fur Coat*, what Bouazza is doing is using forgotten Dutch words and seeking to place himself in the Dutch literary tradition of the Eighties Movement and of important classic Dutch authors such as Louis Couperus and Herman Gorter. However, because of Bouazza's name and the setting of his stories, a large part of his reading public will perceive the resulting 'alien' language and style as stemming from his Arab background. Or as proof of the fact that Bouazza, as one critic phrased it, "does not write in Dutch, but in '*Allochtonian*'".[102]

Thus, we can discern two implied readers in these texts: those who recognise the real origins of the 'exotic' style and who realise that an Orientalist discourse is "mentioned", but not "used" – and those who don't. At first, the latter group seem to be a *narrative audience*, as I called it, following Peter Rabinowitz, in Chapter 2.[103] It can be argued, however, that these 'naïve' readers do belong to Bouazza's *authorial audience*, i.e. the audience for whom the work

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debuutbundel De voeten van Abdullah (1996) wekte hij de mohammedaanse wereld van zijn Marokkaanse achterland tot leven"). Nico Dros, "Over schrijverschap en politiek" (2003): 48. One could defend such rather naive readings of Bouazza's debut with the fact that on the back cover of the Dutch first edition of *Abdullah's Feet* it says: "[Bouazza's] colourful stories have their origins in the memories of a village in Morocco" ("[Bouazza's] kleurrijke verhalen vinden hun oorsprong in herinneringen aan een dorp in Marokko"). Hafid Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdullah* (1996). We find a similar statement on the cover of the English translation: "Based on the author's memories of a 'lively village with its own idiot and mosque' in Morocco". Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000).

101 Jaap Goedegebuure, "De exotica van het gezochte woord" (1996).

102 "Bouazza gaat er prat op dat hij geen Nederlands schrijft maar 'Allochtoons'". Nico de Boer, "Tweede boek Hafid Bouazza is een teleurstelling" (1998). Strangely enough, de Boer is assuming that Bouazza actually prides himself on the fact that he writes "Allochtonian", so that "he can and may write anything he thinks right" ("alles kan en mag schrijven wat hem goeddunkt"). Most probably, the critic has misunderstood a statement Bouazza made when trying to explain why he considers it ridiculous to call him anything besides a Dutch author: "A French writer is someone who writes in French, an allochtonous author is someone who writes in allochtonian and a Dutch writer writes in Dutch." ("Een Franse schrijver is iemand die in het Frans schrijft, een allochtone schrijver is iemand die in het allochtoons schrijft en een Nederlandse schrijver schrijft in het Nederlands"). Cited in N.N., "Als ik al ergens woon, is het in de taal" (1998).

103 Cf. chapter 2, p. 23.

has been written – in this case to be misled. The readers who are part of this audience are the "targets" or "victims" of Bouazza's ironic play with Orientalism.[104] As I wrote before, this explains why Bouazza blatantly shows his indignation about his readers' exotism in essays and interviews, even when this is not entirely justified. For a maximum effect of the ironising of a naïve reading of his work, the *authorial audience* that is conscious of the ironic tone of these texts must be convinced that there are naïve readers who do not 'get it'.

It is important, however, to stress that the Orientalist gaze is not the only thing that is ironised in Bouazza's representations of the Muslim world and Muslims. Again, the irony is not a simply reversal. It has often been noted that, as Ieme van der Poel formulates it, Bouazza's work is "a refined parody in which all existing contemporary Dutch clichés of Morocco and Moroccans are effectively undermined".[105] Be that as it may, the clichés are not just simply undermined. The exuberant countries of origin and strange Muslim characters reflect Bouazza's criticism concerning the misogyny backwardness and 'self-exoticising' of Muslims, as the author has expressed it in his contributions to the public debate.

4.1.2. Grotesques

According to Edward Said, the fascination for with disgusting details and perverse eroticism in Orientalism stems from ""a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections". Thus, the Other functions as a mirror image (in the sense of a total reversal, perversion) of the West.[106] It is precisely this Freudian process of exoticising as a form of sublimation and projection that is being exposed in Bouazza's stories. The grotesque representations of encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim characters repeat the stereotyped images that ensure 'Muslims' and the 'Dutch' remain strangers for each other, according to Bouazza. In her study on the grotesque, Annie van den Oever has claimed that this style is "an artistic problematising of the conventional way in which the world is subjectively represented".[107] The grotesque relates "in a specific, upside down way to the conventional forms of watching and reading".[108] Grotesque

104 Linda Hutcheon's terms. Cf. the last chapter, p. 101.

105 "[E]en geraffineerde parodie waarin alle cliché's over Marokko en de Marokkanen zoals die vandaag de dag in Nederland bestaan op effectieve wijze worden ondergraven". Ieme van der Poel, "Literatuur-met-een-accent" (2009): 15.

106 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1994): 8.

107 "[E]en artistieke problematisering van de conventionele manier waarop de wereld niet-waardevrij wordt gerepresenteerd". Annie van den Oever, *<Fritzi> en het groteske* (2003): 71.

108 "[I]n een specifieke averechtse verhouding tot de kijk- of leesconventies". Ibidem.

representations always deform and twist, so that the "natural order", with its dichotomies that lie at the base of the usual way in which reality is represented, is questioned and demolished.[109]

This is probably what Ieme van der Poel aims at when she writes that Bouazza's work "confronts us with a carnival world in which […] the mutual thinking in stereotypes is effectively floored".[110] However, Bouazza's grotesques are not always the kind of cheerful carnival worlds that we know from authors such as Rabelais. Rather than the kind of folk grotesque that we find in the work of this quintessential grotesque author from the Renaissance, they remind us of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the Romantic grotesque, of which he writes in his study of Rabelais's work: "The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire the reader with this fear".[111] In a text like Bouazza's *Salomon*, the grotesques are not meant to chase away the fear and turn horror into something more cheerful and funny, as is the case with the grotesques of the Renaissance. The dreary, lonely madness of the narrator of this novel is far removed from the "'festive' madness" that characterises the "folk grotesque" of the Renaissance, according to Bakhtin. There is an outspoken grimness to *Salomon*, as in the following passage in which the narrator describes a nervous breakdown after his Muslim guest has driven him over the edge:

> Koortsig lag ik in bed. […] Stemmen klonken om mij heen, een theekransje van gerimpelde gezichten […]. Paarse klauwen krasten op mijn brillenglazen […]. Op een onbewaakt ogenblik vluchtte ik naar zolder […]. Kadavers met levende ogen hingen daar te bloeden, chimaera's knabbelden aan wat menselijke botten moesten zijn, griffioenen liepen heen en weer […], harpijen keutelden dat het een lieve lust was en schalden met hun aarstrompetten […]. Groene leeuwen kwamen de gezeefde zon door de gaten in het verschroeide plafond verzwelgen.[112]
>
> Feverish, I lay in bed. […] Voices could be heard around me, a tea-party of wrinkled faces […]. Purple claws scratched my glasses […]. In an unguarded moment, I fled to the attic [.,.]. Carrions with living eyes were hanging there and bleeding, chimaeras where munching on what must be human bones, griffins were pacing up and down […], harpies were pelleting to their hearts' delight while sounding their arse trumpets […]. Green lions came to gobble up the sieved sun through the holes in the singed roof.

109 "[V]ervormen, verwringen, vertekenen"; "natuurlijke orde". Ibidem: 24-78.

110 "[Zijn werk] schotelt ons een carnavaleske wereld voor waarin […] het denken in stereotypen over en weer op doeltreffende wijze onderuit wordt gehaald". Ieme van der Poel, "Literatuur-met-een-accent" (2009): 14.

111 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (1984): 38-39, 41.

112 Hafid Bouazza, *Salomon* (2001): 119.

This insanity truly fits what Bakhtin says of the Romantic grotesque: "In Romantic grotesque […] madness acquires a sombre, tragic aspect of individual isolation".[113]

Admittedly, there is more to *Salomon* than mere grimness. Its narrator is clearly meant as a caricature. A caricature, for instance, of what Bouazza has called the "weak attitude" of the Dutch, allowing Muslims to "play so many dirty tricks"[114] or of the cultural relativists who Bouazza has taken to task in his contributions to the public debate for actually holding in contempt the non-Western cultures that they claim to respect. Their discourse is taken *ad absurdum* in *Salomon*, for instance, in a passage in which the narrator excuses himself for fainting when he saw the sacrificial lamb that his Muslim guest, whom he calls Bileam, keeps in the bathroom: "I am always willing to get to know other customs and cultures. My fault. I should have gained more in-depth knowledge of the mirage of your colourful background. How unforgivable of me […]. The caveman Bileam curled his lips like a mule adjusting his bit".[115] In an ironic way and a grotesque setting, the 'multicultural tragedy' is presented here as an absurdist performance with a vicious Muslim and pedantic Dutchman in the starring roles. The first feigns an exotic otherness in order to get away with anything, while the second seems to have trouble believing that he himself has any real tolerance for his barbaric housemate. No doubt these sarcastic passages are meant to be funny, but the grotesques in *Salomon* do not aim at the cordial, relieved laughter that accompanies the carnival grotesque. As usual with Romantic grotesque, laughter loses its merry and lively tone: "All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world".[116]

I have stressed the fact that Bouazza's grotesque is not always of the carnival kind, because there is an ethical dimension to the difference between folk grotesque and Romantic grotesque. The latter presents a much more pessimist worldview than the first. Bakhtin notes of folk grotesque that it liberates the common people of "official reason [and] the narrow seriousness of official

113 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world* (1984): 34.

114 "Ik begrijp de slappe houding van de Nederlandse overheid niet. Als moslims ergens hun superioriteitsgevoel vandaan halen dan is het wel dat ze de Nederlanders zoveel poetsen kunnen bakken". Hafid Bouazza, "Nederland is blind voor moslimextremisme" (2002).

115 "Ik ben nooit te beroerd andere gebruiken en culturen te leren kennen. Mijn schuld. Ik had mij moeten verdiepen in de mirage van uw bonte achtergrond. Onvergeeflijk van mij […]. De holenmens Bileam krulde zijn lippen op als een muilezel die zijn bit verstelt". Hafid Bouazza, *Salomon* (2001): 116.

116 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (1984): 38-39.

'truth'", which keeps the elite in power.[117] Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, is aimed at the individual, who has to be liberated of the bourgeois mediocrity to which he or she is superior. This corresponds to Bouazza's elitist *posture* and to the fact that the target of his satire is not just the 'official' Dutch truth in which the non-Western Other is exoticised. However, the necessity of liberating 'the' oppressed Muslim is equally satirised.

In line with this, the Muslim who haunts the narrator of *Salomon* is not a cheerful demon that makes us realise (contra the "official truth") that 'Muslims' are not so bad after all. At first, it is easy to get this impression from the novel, because Bileam's alien nature is so clearly part of the narrator's madness. For the narrator, Bileam is a strange creature, a typical grotesque: half human, half animal, with a repulsive corporeality. The mad narrator presents the Muslim in his house as but another example of the weird creatures that populate his world, of the same order as harpies and griffins:

> Hij had een ijzerdraden haardos die eruitzag als een kluwen wol na aanranding door een bende kittekatten; zijn haren wezen alle windrichtingen aan. Zijn ogen hadden een obscene blik, zijn onverzorgde snorharen waren van hun blaadjes ontdaan (zij houdt van me, zij houdt niet van me) en de verschroeide lippen sloten moeilijk om zijn vooruitstekend gebit, zodat zijn mond meer op een snavel dan op iets menselijks leek. Hij had zelfs een gouden tand, de sybariet, even verschoten van kleur als de rest van zijn rottend elpenbeen. Hij was klein, scheef in elkaar gezet en schuifelde als een oude man door het huis op zijn immer ongestopte sokken. Deze sokken gaven een rijk boeket van odeurs af en hoewel hij zich waste leek hij zijn trouwe voeten over te slaan of zijn sokken tijdens zijn wekelijkse douche aan te houden.[118]
>
> He had a thick head of hair like iron wire which looked like a jumbled ball of wool after an assault by a gang of kitty cats; his hairs pointed to the four winds. His eyes had an obscene gaze, his untidy moustache had been bereft of its leaves (she loves me, she loves me not) and the scorched lips closed around his protruding teeth with difficulty, so that his mouth resembled a beak more than anything human. He even had a golden tooth, the sybarite, as faded of colour as the rest of his rotting ivory. He was small, put together obliquely, and shuffled through the house like an old man on his perpetually torn socks. These socks gave off a rich bouquet of odours and although he washed himself, he seemed to skip his faithful feet, or at least keep his socks on, during his weekly shower.

Because of the grotesque form, the process of *othering*, which I have described as the *negotiation* of 'self' and 'other', becomes the underlying structure of the text in *Salomon*. The alienating effect of the grotesque way in which Bileam is presented mimics, as it were, the way in which migrants are made *strange* (i.e. into a stranger, an alien or Other).

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117 Ibidem: 34.

118 Hafid Bouazza, *Salomon* (2001): 83-84.

The recurrent trope of mirrors and reflections in the novel can be understood in this light. It is implied that Bileam is, in fact, merely a reflection of the narrator. The narrator is terrified of the windows in his living room: "I could not stand the reflection in the glass", he says, and he claims that his "reflection has a life of its own".[119] He therefore prefers to keep his curtains closed, because he does not want to be confronted with "that ghost preserved in spirits behind my windows".[120] It is significant that Bileam comes from behind those windows: "I […] opened the curtains and there […] was a man lying there, snoring".[121] Precisely how Bileam ended up on his balcony on the fourth floor is never clarified. Thus, it is suggested – although other possible, contrary interpretations are kept open as well[122] – that Bileam is an "imaginary companion", as Louwerse calls it.[123]

I would add that the notion that Bileam is, in fact, the narrator's mirror image come alive is important here. Such an alter ego, a well-known trope in grotesque literature, is easily linked with the often proposed idea of the primitive Other as Western society's mirror image. In *The Invention of Primitive Society*, Adam Kuper writes, for instance, how for many Western anthropologists, "primitive society proved to be their own society (as they understood it), seen in *a distorting mirror*".[124] Edward Said observes something similar in the case of late nineteenth, early twentieth century Orientalism: he claims that the mirror metaphor is an apt description for the "highly tendentious […] vision of Islam" that could be found among Orientalistis of those times, as it seems that "each [of them] saw Islam as a reflection of his own chosen weakness".[125] Bileam as a figment of the narrator's imagination is yet another example of the "delusion of the eye" in Bouazza's writings. The metaphor of the mirror image adds something to that: just like the primitives and Orientals in the eyes of certain Western researchers, Bileam is everything the narrator fears to be, a perverted, reversed

119 "Ik kon niet tegen de reflectie in het glas […] de weerspiegeling […] leidde een eigen leven". Ibidem: 87-88.

120 "[D]at spook op sterk water achter mijn vitrines". Ibidem.

121 "[I]k […] trok de gordijnen open en daar […] lag een man te snurken". Ibidem: 82-83.

122 Cf. Bas Groes, "Woorddronken Honingtonnen" (2003): 139-150. Groes states that Salomon should be read as an anti-novel that is deliberately incomprehensible: the overwhelming, elusive linguistic usage and the fragmentised, and sometimes contradictory narrative, invite the reader to construct a story, while at the same time it is made clear that this is impossible.

123 Henriëtte Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment* (2007): 144. "Whether Bileam is a real person or another imaginary companion is difficult to establish". I would say, this it is meant to be difficult to establish.

124 Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society* (1988): 5. Italics added.

125 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1995): 209.

version of the refined, well-spoken and civilised person that he is, as he keeps assuring his audience.

Again, however, it would be too simplistic to read *Salomon* as an unmasking of a Western exoticising of Islam and Muslims. Bouazza's satire cuts both ways. After all, Bileam could easily be seen as a hyperbolic parody of Muslims as we know them from Bouazza's op-eds and essays: lazy, backwards and simply refusing to adapt. It is striking to note that the passage about an "alien gaze" in *A Bear in Fur Coat* resembles almost *ad verbum* a passage in *Salomon* where Bileam sits on the toilet, "where he cherished his nostalgia, because he was delighted by the toilet paper, not just because only water was used in his matrix land, but most of all because of the print on the tissues, which reminded him of the skies of his birthplace".[126] The "alien gaze" in effect! As we have seen, Bileam is even called a "caveman" and as can be expected of a caveman, he doesn't know what to do in a Dutch kitchen, where he decides to store "his socks in the kitchen drawer".[127]

It remains unclear what exactly is being parodied here: the "mirage" of *image*-ination that is apparent in the narrator's grotesque gaze through which Bileam is viewed, or the self-exoticising behaviour of Muslims, refusing to adapt, of which Bileam's caveman-like behaviour is reminiscent. *Salomon* can be read as containing exemplifications of several discourses that we know from Bouazza's contributions to public and literary debates and which are disrupted through the inherent instabilities of the grotesque. However, this same instability makes a definitive judgment impossible. What the ambiguity of the character of Bileam and his relation with the narrator do make clear, however, is that Bouazza's work is not emancipatory in the sense that the liberation of an oppressed minority or the celebration of a minority perspective is implied. Rather, they show a sarcastic reversal of the notion of the oppressed Muslim who needs to be liberated.

4.2. Characters deforming one other

In the last chapter, I discussed how Abdelkader Benali neutralised the 'clash of civilisations' by conjuring it up in pathetic and burlesque forms, by juxtaposing, for instance, a ridiculous imam who fears the Dutch wind with a Dutch father who imagines himself on a crusade at the local mosque. Bouazza does some-

126 "[O]p het toilet waar hij zijn weemoed koesterde, want hij raakte verrukt door het toiletpapier, niet alleen omdat in zijn matrixland water werd gebruikt, maar vooral door de opdruk op de tissues, die hem aan de lucht van zijn bakermat herinnerde". Hafid Bouazza, *Salomon* (2001): 84.

127 "[H]ij [bewaarde] zijn sokken vaak in de keukenlade". Ibidem: 122.

thing similar in his stories about encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim characters. However, unlike Benali, his characters do not evoke empathy. This is prevented by the sarcastic tone of his stories, in which vicious, grunting 'Muslims' continuously show their misogynist ideas and fear for the West and gullible 'Dutchmen' never cease in their exoticism. Rather, the reader is invited, like the author, to superiorly shake his or her head about the ludicrous society which is being exposed.

I have mentioned before how, despite the autonomist conception of literature that Bouazza professes in interviews and essays, the social and cultural issues that he sketches elsewhere return in his literature. The strange caricatures in his stories reflect the same gap between 'East' and 'West' that is presented as a realist representation in the work of Kader Abdolah. In Bouazza's stories, this gap is produced, on the one hand, by too much *image*-ination, as a sociological process in which the Other is made into an image, and on the other hand by too little imagination, as a force with which one can reinvent oneself (one's self) and the Other and thus move beyond the mutual "conceptualisation".

In these stories, the "alien gaze" and its opposite, the 'exoticising gaze', play an important role. They are used in Bouazza's work for an aesthetic *alienation*, as Russian literary theorist Victor Shklovsky has called it.[128] In his famous article, "Art as Technique", Shklovsky writes that one of literature's most important functions is to alienate our quotidian, automatised reality. Literature does so by using *techniques*.[129] As an example of such a techniques, Shklovsky mentions a story by Tolstoy in which the narrator is a horse and the human world is described from a horse's perspective. The result is that all kinds of normal customs suddenly become alien and absurd: they are made strange.[130] Bouazza alienates in a similar way, using caricatures rather than horses. He has his characters do exactly what the writer in *A Bear in Fur Coat* refused when a "famous newspaper" called to ask him to look at pictures of Dutch people in their kitchen with his "alien gaze": in several of his stories, he shows the world through the eyes of Muslim characters for whom Dutch things are alien. He contrasts these with Dutch characters for whom everything Arab and Islamic looks mysterious and exotic.

In Section 4.2.1., I will discuss how Bouazza lets his characters 'perform' the gap between 'East' and 'West' in this way. In my analysis of Bouazza's con-

128 Alienation is but one possible translation of the original term 'ostranenie'. In Russian, it was a neologism that Shklovsky himself coined and which has been translated as "alienation" as well as "defamiliarisation, deautomatisation and estrangement". Cf. Annie van den Oever, "Introduction: Ostran(n)enie as an "Attractive" Concept" (2010): 12.

129 Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1997): 720.

130 Ibidem: 721-722.

tributions to the public and literary debate I have shown how the author claimed that mutual prejudices created a situation where 'Dutch' and 'Muslims' remained strangers for each other. In his literary work, Bouazza uses this social tensions for cynical stories about characters who literally *alien*ate each other, no matter how intimate their relationships. Then, in Section 4.2.3., I will analyse how imagination functions as a trope in Bouazza's literary work. In his stories, imagination is both the cause of the gap between 'East' and 'West' and a solution out of the deadlock of that very gap. The latter is often only implied in his work, except in *Paravion*, where it suddenly becomes part of the story in very concrete images.

4.2.1. Mutual *image*-ination as a problem

The central role of "delusions of the eye" in Bouazza's work results in stories in which looking and being seen are important activities. Looking is never a passive registration for his characters. In these texts, a watching person is always a Procrustes who distorts what is being watched into a preconceived image of the Other: "Here I am in your country, and it looks disappointingly like the postcards", the woman in "Apolline" writes to her Moroccan lover.[131] Again, the reader could easily jump to the conclusion (and is teasingly invited to do so) to interpret stories like these as emancipatory. After all, the notion that marginal groups in society are the victims of symbolic violence when they are being watched from the majority perspective is a recurrent trope in, for instance, migrant and feminist literature.

However, Bouazza plays with the expectation that the silenced *allochtone* is given a voice in his work.[132] The way in which he makes the Procrustean gaze into a trope is reminiscent of work by migrant authors such as Salman Rushdie, who does something similar in *The Satanic Verses*. In that novel, the distorting gaze of Westerners is an important theme. People from India, Nigeria and Senegal suffer strange transformations after arriving in Great Britain: they change into animals or mythical hybrids such as the manticore. A victim explains how this is possible: "[The English] describe us […]. That's all. They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they construct".[133] However, in Bouazza's stories not only 'minorities' have to "succumb" to the image that has been constructed for them: this happens to all parties when 'Dutchmen' and

131 Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): 100.

132 In this respect, the ironic title of his column about the hype surrounding 'allochtone authors' can be understood: "Allochtones with a voice". Cf. Hafid Bouazza, "Allochtonen met een stem" (1996).

133 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988): 168.

'Muslims' meet. A good example of this mutually succumbing can be found in *Paravion*. The country of origin in this novel is called Morea. This can be seen as a reference to the '*moria*' in Erasmus's *Morias Encomium*, which would stress the fact that Paravion should be read as social satire. However, I would first and foremost read this name as a reference to words like Moors or Morians, used to designate the inhabitants of North Africa (and, by extension, Muslims in general) in Medieval Europe, and, quite possibly (taking Bouazza's often professed love for Medieval literature into account), to Moriane, the country where the black Arthurian knight Moriaen was born.[134] This is fitting, since Morea in *Paravion* fits all Western clichés of the Orient, as mentioned in Section 4.1.1. That Morocco has been replaced with the name of (or rather, has *become*) an imagined Oriental country should no doubt be read as a comment on how Western prejudices define what is 'authentically' Oriental. However, the "power of description has been distributed equally here: the name of the Western city to which the Moreans migrate (clearly recognisable as Amsterdam) is no less of a mistake. When the villagers who have stayed behind receive mail from their migrated compatriots, they think the sticker saying "par avion" is the name of the country where they now live. The misconception becomes reality in the fictional world of the novel: the city is really called Paravion and is an embodiment of the stereotypical loose and free-thinking Western city.

This mutual *image*-ination of the Other introduces a clichéd dichotomy in Bouazza's work, with on the one hand a magic, often strictly religious country of origin and on the other hand the West with its naked women, alcohol and looseness. We have seen this dichotomy before, in the work of Kader Abdolah. However, unlike Abdolah, Bouazza decidedly locates it *in the eye of the beholder*. Orientalist and Occidentalist prejudices are represented as larger than life, set in a bizarre world of hyperbole and fabulation. The Moreans travel to Paravion on the flying carpets that the Western cliché ascribes to the 'East'. Conversely, the central park of Amsterdam, the Vondelpark, becomes a mythical pleasure garden full of naked, drunken women in the eyes of a group Muslim "brethren":

> Mensen zaten in groepen te drinken en de wijn veroorzaakte een uitstekende dronkenschap […]. Veel mensen waren naakt, veel zonnebadende vrouwen lagen op hun rug […]; het melkblauw van hun zijwaarts hangende borsten als lampions was een herinnering aan een vergeten zogen […]. De aanwezigheid van nimfen en woudgeesten was vertrouwd, evenals de bronst van de saters die op nimfen joegen

134 Cf. Bouazza calling the migrant author "a Morian-teddy". Morea is an old name for the Peloponnese as well, which can be linked to the pastoral character of the passages that are set in Morea. In fact, *Paravion* has strong intertextual ties to the work of Theocritus, which is generously cited throughout the novel.

> maar er geen vingen […]. Op gevleugelde sandalen of met gevleugelde hielen raasden jongelingen voorbij.[135]
>
> People sat around drinking in groups and the wine caused an excellent drunkenness […]. Many people were naked, many sunbathing women lay on their backs […]; the milky blue of their drooping breasts resembling Chinese lanterns was a memory of a forgotten nursing […]. The presence of nymphs and forest spirits was familiar, just as the Satyrs in heat chasing nymphs but catching none […]. Youngsters raced past on winged sandals or winged heels.

The exaggeration of Dutch looseness, the metaphors taken literally (young people flirting are not *like* nymphs and satyrs, but the park is really full of these mythical creatures) and the striking alienation (rollerblades become "winged sandals" in the eyes of the "brethren"): it is a reversal of Orientalism, which tends to turn the Muslim world in to a mysterious and fairy-tale land.

This is the use of the "alien gaze" as a Shklovskian *technique* that I mentioned earlier. We find many examples of it in *Paravion*, most notably when a Morean immigrant takes a long walk through the Western city. Focalised through this character, the living statues on the central Dam square in Amsterdam become scarecrows, while cash machines are perceived as "a wall that discharges money" or "an invisible money tree".[136] When this man observes the modern city traffic, he is amazed by all the "ingenious vehicles", but doubts whether they really can replace the "[h]oofs and wooden wheels" of his native country.[137] Here, the aesthetic effect of an "an eye with pupils in which the magical scenes, beheld in the womb country, still continue to shine" is used to *alienate* the quotidian.

At the same time, it is made clear that such a gaze is a handicap, as Bouazza mentioned in *A Bear in Fur Coat*, since "the current surroundings are obscured" by it. The immigrant focaliser in the passage cited above is first and foremost characterised as archaic and incomprehensive by the way in which he perceives his "current surroundings". To look is to *image*-ine in these stories: reality is not observed, but created. It is not only the "alien gaze" that does this; the exoticising gaze is equally Procrustean. One of the central storylines in *Paravion* concerns a Paravionian woman who falls in love with a Morean man called "the teacher". In the eyes of his beloved, this rather boorish man becomes an Eastern prince: "She wanted to put a turban on his head, to make up his eyelashes with mascara. In him, she had found all the oriental beauties she was looking for".[138]

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135 Hafid Bouazza, *Paravion* (2003): 171-174.

136 "[E]en muur die geld afscheidde"; "een onzichtbare geldboom".Ibidem: 147-148.

137 "[I]ngenieuze vehikels"; "Hoeven en houten wielen". Ibidem.

138 "Zij wilde hem een tulband opzetten, zijn wimpers met mascara opmaken. Ze had in hem alle oriëntaalse schoonheden gevonden die ze zocht". Ibidem: 160.

Rather than seeing what is there, this woman is ready to adapt what is in front of her to what she wants to see – again, reality is obscured.

Especially in the stories that deal with love affairs between Muslims and non-Muslims, Bouazza draws attention to the process of *image*-ination and the symbolic violence of deformation which it implies. Even the names of the Western women in these stories, Mamette in *Paravion* and Apolline in "Apolline", make clear that something is being said about the importance of Occidentalist and Orientalist prejudices in the encounter between 'Muslims' and 'Dutch'. In "Apolline" the eponymous character says about her own name: "Apolline is the name of one of the three gods who, in the Middle Ages, were said to be worshipped by the Moors. The other two were *Mamette* and Termagaunt".[139] These names are a typical example of the way in which Bouazza turns the mutual conception of the West and the Muslim world into a trope in his work. In the theatre play Apolline, he has the character called The Turk explain to Apolline's Moroccan lover what is taking place here:

> Wat jij voor de vrouwelijke glorie van het Westen houdt is niets anders dan de god die wij aan jullie hebben opgedrongen. Alle lof voor de bewonderingswaardige distributie en impact van mannenbladen. Het doet me wel plezier te zien dat wij er niet naast zaten. Jullie accepteren graag de wereld waarin wij jullie graag zien.[140]
>
> That which you hold for the female glory of the West is nothing but the god that we have forced upon you. Praised be the admirable distribution and impact of men's magazines. I must say it pleases me that we weren't wrong. You do like to accept the world in which we like to see you.

What is left to the reader in the rest of Bouazza's work is explained here almost didactically: the use of names like Apolline and Mamette should be interpreted as symbolic for the fact that the Muslims in these stories have embraced a false authenticity. They have become walking clichés confirming the Orientalist fantasies of Westerners. Thus, we see how Bouazza's critique of the mutual "stranglehold" returns in the synthetic sphere of meaning (through his ironic use of a fake exotic and by using names like "Apolline" and "Mamette") and in the mimetic sphere of meaning, where places and people become clichés. It is precisely this critique that defines to a large extent the thematic sphere of meaning.

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139 In fact, Ina Rilke has translated the original Dutch line, "De andere twee zijn Mamette en Termogant", as follows: "The other two were Mahound and Termagaunt". Rilke justly chooses a transculturalising approach in her translation, as Mahound was a medieval corruption of the name Mohammed in English, just as Mamette was in Dutch. However, as the link with the main female character of *Paravion* that I want to highlight is lost in translation here, I have slightly altered Rilke's translation. Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): 102. Cf. Hafid Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdollah* (1996): 115.

140 Hafid Bouazza, *Apollien. Een toneelstuk* (1998): 29.

That it really is the *mutual* character of this "stranglehold" that is being criticised here becomes clear when we take a closer look at a story like "Apolline". Like Bouazza's other work, this is not just a story about a Muslim who is either forced to give up his identity or to succumb to an Orientalist image of the Other. Humayd Humayd, the Moroccan narrator may merely be a "postcard" for his Dutch girlfriend but the same holds true vice versa. He narrates how during his youth he was confronted with

> pictures of naked women, with curved cleft forms, with fair hair and parted lips. I saw mossy deltas, dusky shadows, roseate berries of flesh. These were bound to be the munificent Sirens of the Occident, and in my heart at that very moment the seeds were sown of my love for Apolline, in whom I was to find the tangible evidence of that two-dimensional voluptuousness. I loved her even before I saw her.[141]

In other words, Humayd himself also turns Apolline into an image. Bouazza may well have taken this idea from *The Satanic Verses*, a novel he has on occasion called his "favourite book".[142] In Rushdie's novel, an English woman complains that Great Britain has always remained "a picture postcard" for her lover, the Indian immigrant Saladin Chamcha, and that she has became part of this postcard: "Warm beer, mince pies, common-sense and me".[143] Again, however, it is the difference between Rushdie and Bouazza that is most significant here. Chamcha's obsession with all things British is clearly caused by a colonial inferiority complex.[144] In "Apolline", however, such colonial victimhood is ironised.

Humayd Humayd addresses his *narrative audience* clearly expecting sympathy for his suffering at the hands of Apolline. If we are to believe this narrator, she has made it impossible for him to be himself: "She scoffed, wishing to divest me of what was to me my identity but to her merely the beads and henna tracery of folklore".[145] The narrator stresses that Apolline's contempt for his cultural identity is mostly manifested between the sheets:

> She believed I was in need of sexual re-education. […] She always threatened (in jest, I hope) to send off a detailed letter [to a women's magazine] if I proved unwilling to satisfy her whims (what else can I call them?) and forswear my ethnic pride

141 Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): 96.

142 "And for a long time, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was my favourite book" ("En lange tijd was De Duivelsverzen van Salman Rushdie mijn lievelingsboek"). Cited in Eline Verburg, "Taal is mijn instrument" (2001).

143 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988): 175.

144 An inferiority complex which is already hinted at with his name: a "chamcha" is an Indian term for a "hanger on, a quisling" ("meeloper, een collaborateur"). Aleid Fokkema, "Chamchawala, Salahuddin" (1996): 25.

145 Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): 97.

> and primitive principles. Adjusting to a new homeland, she said, had to start, rather literally, from the bottom. She wouldn't take no for an answer […]. I remember the first time she made me kiss her Venus shell. […] She steered my head southwards with considerable vigour: I resisted. In the course of an ungainly choreography a skirmish ensued […]. In the end I gave in […].[146]

The rhetoric of this passage is clear: the word "whims" suggests that Apolline is being unreasonable here and the parenthetic remark following it shows a narrator who expects his audience to agree with him.

Furthermore, the remark about "[a]djusting to a new homeland" makes this "skirmish" into something more than coerced oral sex. With it, Bouazza suggests (but, as we will see, ultimately negates) a reading strategy that focuses on the thematic sphere of meaning. Its rhetoric force is that instead of two individuals, two communities are facing each other here. Just as in Benali's stories about encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims, where explosive social issues are reduced to confused delusions and children's song, it is striking how banal the public debate is represented in this story. The different positions in that debate are ridiculed by being turned into oral sex between blatantly clichéd stereotypes of 'East' and 'West'.

Thus, Bouazza taps into a rich cultural matrix, as I have called it in the introduction. Apolline's remark is a clear reference to the contemporary public debate about the extent to which it may be expected of newcomers that they adjust "to a new homeland". One contribution to that debate from 1997 sums up certain developments in the relationships between immigrants and the original Dutch population as follows:

> [T]he last few years [we have] reconsidered the all too soft policy of the seventies and eighties, when minorities were dealt with very cautiously because it was feared that we would offend their sense of identity. Nowadays, we demand something of minorities themselves. For instance, the immigrant will have to sign a naturalisation contract, in which he commits himself to speak our language, for instance.
>
> To dig out a heavily loaded term such as "coerced assimilation" for this seems highly exaggerated to me. What could be said, is that a process has crept in that makes it is easier to say that "they" must adapt to us.[147]

146 Ibidem: 98-99.

147 "[D]e afgelopen jaren [zijn we] teruggekomen van het al te softe beleid van de jaren zeventig en tachtig, toen minderheden uiterst omzichtig behandeld werden uit vrees dat we hun identiteitsbeleving te na zouden komen. Inmiddels eisen we ook iets van de minderheden zelf. Zo zal de immigrant een inburgeringscontract moeten tekenen, waarin hij zichzelf onder meer verplicht onze taal te spreken. Om daarvoor een zwaar beladen begrip als 'geforceerde assimilatie' van stal te halen, lijkt me zwaar overdreven. Wat je wel kunt zeggen is dat er sluipenderwijs een proces op gang is gekomen, waarin

This is, in effect, the plot of "Apolline", although the "naturalisation contract" has been replaced with cunnilingus.

At least, that is how Humayd presents it. His story reads as an appeal to his *narrative audience*: it will agree with him that she has offended his "sense of identity" with her "whims". In the rhetoric of his narrative, their erotic "skirmish" becomes a form of "coerced integration" and anyone with a heart for the cause of minorities should feel for him. For this reason, Bouazza has Humayd continuously presenting Apolline as a bully, complaining that she "wouldn't take no for an answer", he has to submit, "[h]er personality began to domineer [his] world".[148] The suggestion of all of this is that whoever sympathises with Humayd will sympathise with a vulnerable community that is forced to give up their cultural identity. Moreover, Humayd's story can be seen as a strongly ironic example of the notion (also found in Abdolah's and Benali's work) that the oriental is bound to lose his masculinity in the encounter with the West: deformation here is a case of symbolic emasculation as well (the passage in which a woman tries to make up the eyelashes of her oriental lover can be interpreted in this way too).[149]

However, it is once again important to realise that the reader who interprets Apolline's remark about "[a]djusting to a new homeland" as an invitation to read this story as a caricature of the public debate about the sense of identity among minorities will not find a story about a poor immigrant whose identity is destroyed. (Note how Bouazza stresses Humayd's craftiness by having him strategically place his narrative of Apolline telling Humayd the origin of her name, and thus suggesting he is indeed being destroyed by her.) What is going on here is an equal struggle for the power to *image*-ine the other. While Kader Abdolah presents himself as the "voice" of *allochtones* in the Netherlands, Bouazza ironises the notion that his work gives expression to a struggle for emancipation. After all, that possible interpretation belongs to the *narrative audience* that sympathises with Humayd Humayd – which is, in fact, ridiculed among the *authorial audience*, who is aware of the fact that Humayd's narrative is rather hypocritical.[150]

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makkelijker gezegd wordt dat 'zij' zich maar aan ons moeten aanpassen". Willem Breedveld, "Geforceerde assimilatie?" (1997).

148 Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): 97.

149 Cf. chapter 3 and 4, p. 66-67 and p. 113.

150 Although actual readers may, of course, interpret the story differently. Readers who see these stories as autobiographical (cf. Section 3.1.1.), or expect of a Dutch author with an Arab name that he will write emancipatory literature, might take Humayd's words at face value. It would be interesting to conduct more reader-oriented research on the deliberately misleading aspect of Bouazza's literature. In the fall of 2007, I taught sociol-

Humayd is clearly an unreliable narrator in the sense that he has questionable morals. This is stressed by his name: the double Humayd Humayd links him to the narrator of another narrative of an obsessive, fatal love: *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert.[151] This intertextuality gives the love story in "Apolline" an air of perversion and impropriety – thus stressing the way an affair with a Dutch woman is viewed by the pious Muslims in *Abdullah's Feet* (including, arguably, Humayd himself). The most important effect of this reference is, however, that it draws attention to the narrating itself: Nabokov's narrator is, after all, a classic example of the unreliable and manipulative narrator, which makes Humayd suspicioust as well. Thus, the reference offers a critical reading strategy: the intertextuality with *Lolita* suggests the possibility that Humayd's narrative is a plea in which the speaker tries to exonerate himself of something for which the reader is most likely to (or maybe even should) judge him harshly.

Even without the reference to Nabokov, Humayd's unreliability is clear. His narrative is constructed in such a way that it gives the impression that his problem is not so much the fact that Apolline domineered him, but that he could not domineer her: "What I resent is not being able to bring Apolline […] to life in my self-wrought language. She always eluded my grasp".[152] The fact that Humayd's Occidentalist misogyny is at least as problematic as Apolline's exotism is foregrounded by the other stories in *Abdullah's Feet*. In them, the containment of women – both physically and figuratively, but always with the aim to subdue them – is an important trope. In the two stories that precede "Apolline", laws are issued to curb their sexuality and the narrator is surrounded by "quiet, humble girls", mostly orphans whose sexual services are at his disposal, merely because of his position as a male.[153] Thus, Oriental men have been exposed as misogynist and fearful of female sexuality earlier in this collection of stories. In this context it is easy to understand why Apolline's voice is scarcely represented in direct speech. The narrator prefers her to remain silent:

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ogy of the arts at the University of Groningen. One of the assignments I gave my students was to write an analysis of the way in which this short story represented social conditions of contemporary Dutch society. It was striking how unanimously these students read "Apollien" as a parable for the bad treatment of foreigners in the Netherlands and how uprooted they may feel among the Dutch who refused to attempt to understand them. Many of the analyses gave the impression that the author's Moroccan descent influenced this interpretation.

151 Which is not surprising, considering the fact that Bouazza has often called Vladimir Nabokov one of his main sources of inspiration. Cf. for instance Amber van der Meulen, "'Als ik schrijf, spookt Nabokov vaak door mijn hoofd'" (2002): 66.

152 Hafid Bouazza, *Abdullah's Feet* (2000): 102.

153 Ibidem: 45-46, 81.

> Oh, she had her good moment, moments of tenderness unswayed by her words. Sometimes she would lean with her hands on the windowsill and stare outside in silence […]. Or she would lie naked on the bed on her stomach reading a magazine, […] and it was at such times that I saw the ditch again and the bearded bachelor dozing in the midday heat in front of his whitewashed abode.[154]

What is clear, is that Humayd possesses what Bouazza will five years later call the "alien gaze" in *A Bear in Fur Coat*: he starts his narrative with the remark that the tree of his youth (actually a transformed boy) "still rustles in my memory" and he sees "his youthful mirror image" reflected in the canals of Amsterdam, together with "the carob trees" of his native village.[155] To that gaze, which, as we have seen, will become a returning trope in Bouazza's work, is added a way of looking which strongly resembles what feminist critic Laura Mulvey has called the *male gaze*. In a world of sexual inequality, according to Mulvey, "[t]he determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly".[156] Here, these two gazes are linked through the fact that, whenever Humayd can look at Apolline in the way he prefers, he is reminded of scenes from his youth in Morocco. The "whitewashed abode" of the "bearded bachelor" in the citation above is the place where the narrator was confronted with pornographic pictures for the first time. Those pictures urged him to migrate to the Netherlands and find the embodiment of the stereotypical Western women they represented. It is a striking combination, since both the *male gaze* and the "alien gaze" are a projection rather than observation in which the object is not really seen, but rather is deformed.

4.2.2. Imagination as solution

In *A Bear in Fur Coat*, Bouazza claims that social issues cannot be solved through literature.[157] However, he does adapt social issues – the same that he discusses in his contributions to public and literary debates – in his stories about encounters between 'Muslims' and the 'Dutch'. And the way in which he does so at least hints at a possible solution. With his satirical representations of the

154 Ibidem: 101.

155 Ibidem: 95, 103

156 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1998): 1448.

157 "There is a hope that social issues concerning immigrants can be solved through or in literature. In literature, a writer does not clarify his social, but rather his artistic position. Social issues need social solutions". ("Er leeft de hoop dat maatschappelijke problemen van immigranten via of in de literatuur hun oplossing vinden. Een schrijver bepaalt in de literatuur niet zijn maatschappelijke, maar zijn artistieke positie. Maatschappelijke problemen hebben sociale oplossingen nodig"). Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 31-32.

gap between 'East' and 'West' Bouazza also represents the possibility of a world without such a gap. After all, satire always implies the *good live ex negativo* and the grotesque always has a "utopian element", according to Bakhtin: ""the Romantic grotesque does this [i.e. sketching a utopia] too, but in its own subjective form. The existing world suddenly becomes alien […] precisely because there is the potentiality of a friendly world, of the golden age, of carnival truth".[158] Moreover, these stories not only imply alternatives in the synthetic sphere of meaning (through the grotesque) and the thematic sphere of meaning (through satire). Especially in *Paravion*, a conception of the good life in a multicultural society is even made clear in the mimetic sphere of meaning.

Arguably, however, the alternatives that are implied in Bouazza's literary stories are far more ambiguous than those that can be found in his contributions to the public debate. In his op-eds Bouazza offers quite simple solutions: the masks of a coerced authenticity need merely be taken off so that individuals can free themselves of the "stranglehold" of collective *image*-inations and see each other for who they really are. Or, as Bouazza formulates it more poetically in *A Bear in Fur Coat*: "love for newness only exists by holding newness in check. The newness is welcome, but only under the host's condition. I would like to plea for unconditional love".[159] Such a situation seems impossible in his literary work, where Bouazza has his characters put masks of Orientalism and Occidentalism on each other. In these stories, there seems to be nothing behind those masks: ""A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it", Bakhtin says about the mask in the Romantic grotesque[160], and this holds true for the masks of *image*-ination in Bouazza's literary work. We can observe this in The Turk in *Apolline. A Play*, of whom I would claim that he is the only character in Bouazza's oeuvre whose eyes are not obscured:

DE TURK […] ik heb gemerkt dat er achter die fronsende starheid van jullie [migranten] geen eindeloze diepten schuilen waar een gekweld hart zijn schrijnende vervreemding schreit. Jullie zijn werkelijk doorzichtig […], maar ik heb mij laten misleiden door de weerspiegeling in de ruit, die ik voor een onderdeel hield van het geboden uitzicht.

HUMAYD En nu haat je ons.

158 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1984): 48.

159 "[D]e liefde voor het nieuwe bestaat alleen bij de gratie van controle over het nieuwe. Het nieuwe is welkom, maar alleen op voorwaarden van de gastheer. Waar ik voor zou willen pleiten is onvoorwaardelijke liefde". Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 12.

160 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1984): 48.

DE TURK Ik haat jullie. Ik haat jullie met de kracht van mijn hart dat maar al te graag liefde zou geven en ontvangen. Ik haat jullie om jullie ondankbaarheid, jullie frivoliteit om wat mij bezighoudt. Jullie onderkruiperigheid haat ik nog het meest. Jullie arrogantie, jullie middeleeuwse denkbeelden over eer en schande. Hoe jullie je vastklampen aan een kledingstuk als een symbool van identiteit, dat rotwoord, dat wij jullie geleerd hebben […].[161]

THE TURK […] I have observed that there are no endless depths where a tormented heart cries its harrowing alienation to be found behind that frowning glassiness of [migrants]. You are truly transparent […], but I have allowed myself to be misled by the reflection in the window, which I perceived as part of the view on offer.

HUMAYD And now you hate us.

THE TURK I hate you. I hate you with the force of my heart which would want so much to give and receive love. I hate you because of your ungratefulness, your frivolity towards what concerns me. Your sliminess I hate most of all. Your arrogance, your medieval notions of honour and shame. How you clasp to a piece of cloth as a symbol of identity, that damned word that we have taught you.

I discussed the mirror metaphor in *Salomon* in Section 4.1.2. It is also apparent in the short story "Apolline", when the narrator and his lover see each other reflected in their eyes. As with the symbolism of the medieval names of the Dutch women in Bouazza's stories, the author has The Turk in *Apolline. A Play* say explicitly what is only implied in his other works: those who look at the Other with an exotic "alien" gaze will only see one's own desires, repressions, interests and projections.

The Turk embodies the ambiguity of Bouazza's work towards the social issues that are drawn into it through its representations of encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims. On the one hand, it is striking how vicious this character's words are, bordering on racism. On the other hand, this is a character who has finally realised that the supposed authenticity of the Other was merely his own imagination (*image*-ination). This establishes him as a reliable commenter who, as Bouazza writes in the stage directions for the play, speaks "with an above all penetrating quick-wittedness".[162] He unmasks, for instance, Humayd's supposed victimhood by drawing attention to his *male gaze* and the way in which Amsterdam has been reduced to pictures from his youth: "Be gone! You live in a two-dimensional world with your vulgar pictures and talks. This

161 Hafid Bouazza, *Apollien. Een toneelstuk* (1998): 14-15.

162 "[M]et een bovenal indringende schranderheid". Ibidem: 48.

city is not an enlarged version of that abode alongside that ditch. And [your Dutch girlfriend] is not a poster hung on a wall with three drawing pins".[163]

Thus, the play is made morally ambiguous, while at the same time the reader is titillated to construct an unambiguous meaning. After all, The Turk's remark about headscarves "as a symbol of identity" place *Apolline. A Play* in the context of the public debate about the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands, much in the same way as this was done with the remark about "[a]djusting to a new homeland" in the short story by the same title. These referrals to controversial social issues strengthen the need for a clear authorial point of view. Although it is well-known that Bouazza himself dislikes headscarves and the way in which Muslims clasp to their so-called culture, the question remains how we must interpret the fact that these opinions are vocalised here by a racist character? And it is clear that this text ridicules the fact that the Other can apparently only be loved if he or she is deformed. But what does it mean when the character who no longer lets his eyes be deluded is only capable of hate – rather than the unconditional love that Bouazza promises in *A Bear in Fur Coat*? As I interpret The Turk, this character first and foremost shows us that without imagination there may be clarity and common sense, but that a life of clarity and common sense is not preferable to a life without imagination (which is, again, a Romantic attitude). Here, the proposition is put forward that imagination is not only inevitable, but also indispensible: without it, there is but a terrible vacuum – and hatred.

Five years after *Apolline. A Play*, this more positive conception of imagination will be adapted much more explicitly in *Paravion* in the image of the mirage: in a world in which everything is reflection and mirroring, it is the fata morgana[164] where 'East' and 'West' come together. With this, Bouazza – despite himself – is no exception. In stories about encounters between 'Muslims' and the 'Dutch' in this period such a utopian element is omnipresent, as we have seen in earlier chapters of this study: the bookcase with 'Eastern' and 'Western' classics in the case of Abdolah; the kingdom of the lie in the case of Benali; and, as I will discuss in the following chapter, a special state of mind in the case of Robert Anker.

In the introductory chapter of this study, I wrote that it is striking how such utopian elements became much more explicit in these stories after 9/11.[165] This holds true for Bouazza as well. In *Paravion*, published in 2003, a strange baby is

163 "Ga heen! Je leeft in een tweedimensionale wereld met die platte plaatjes en praatjes van jou. Deze stad is geen uitvergrote versie van dat huisje bij dat slootje. En Mirjanna is geen poster aan de muur met drie punaises opgehangen". Ibidem: 12.

164 Arthurian connotations continuously pop up in Paravion.

165 Cf. the introduction, p. 22.

born towards the end of the novel: "one half was white and of a milky blue transparency, the other half was black, blue-like black".[166] This can be read as a symbol similar to Benali's Long Awaited, the baby who succeeded in uniting what had also been incompatible throughout that story. This baby was a kind of embodiment of the central issue of *The Long Awaited* (*De langverwachte*, 2002): to create a new hybrid story in which 'East' and 'West' could be united, using lies, acting and 'bullshitting'. The half white, half black fantasy figure that is born at the end of *Paravion* fits the much more cerebral mixing in Bouazza's novel: here fantasies about the Other, visions and dreams, are mixed, rather than stories and families.

Yet, the eyes of the characters of *Paravion* remain firmly deluded. Mamette is a variation on Madam Split, ecstatically adoring "cheap editions of Persian and Arabian poetry".[167] Thus, her madness – "she was convinced that her house was possessed […] by the spirit of the Orient"[168] – can be read as the type of ironic representation of Orientalism we have seen in Bouazza's work before. The fact that this is done in the mimetic sphere of meaning rather than the synthetic sphere of meaning, as in the examples given in Section 4.1.1., allows Bouazza to be much more explicit. For instance in the passage where Mamette's Morean lover enters her house:

> Eenmaal binnen zag hij de bont en wild geschilderde muren van haar kamer […], overal kitsch: ze woonde in een ware bazaar. Voor haar belichaamde de onderwijzer alles wat zij in haar dromen van cannabis of LSD voor moors aanzag, blijkbaar een combinatie van stinkende wierook en plastic dolken. Als het maar krulde, walmde, kromde, boerde of overdadig was, alles wat nep was.[169]
>
> Once inside, he saw the colourful, wildly painted, walls of her rooms […], kitsch everywhere. Kitsch everywhere: she lived in a true bazaar. For her the teacher embodied everything that she held to be Moorish in her dreams of cannabis or LSD, apparently a combination of smelly incense and plastic daggers. As long as it curled, smoked, curved, burped or was excessive, anything fake.

On the other hand, fake and authenticity cannot be told apart in the world of *Paravion*: after all, we know from the descriptions of Morea, with its flying car-

166 "[É]én helft was blank en van melkblauwe doorzichtigheid, de andere helft was zwart, blauwig zwart". Hafid Bouazza, *Paravion* (2004): 202. The baby is reminiscent of the black and white checkered half-blood Moor from Wolfram von Esschenbach's, Parzival, together with the aforementioned Morian, who were among the first black characters in European literature.

167 "[G]oedkope edities van Perzische en Arabische poëzie". Ibidem: 150.

168 "[Z]ij was ervan overtuigd dat haar huis bezeten was […] door de spirit van het Morgenland". Ibidem: 160.

169 Ibidem: 158.

pets, that it actually *is* an Oriental fantasy not much different from Mamette's garish room. In *Paravion*, the "mirage of [a] colourful background", as the narrator of *Salomon* phrases it, is more than a coerced authenticity and it even goes beyond the self-exoticising we have seen before. Here, more is at stake than just a *technique* or a novelty that Bouazza uses to mislead and seduce his readers. The power of the eye to create images rather than to observe results in a fluid identity in which the 'gap' between 'East' and 'West' is bridged. Contrary to the narrator of *Salomon*, Mamette's madness is ultimately productive and energising: her room of Moorish fake becomes a passage through which bowls full of "lemons, almonds, oranges, apples and dried figs" are brought to Paravion by Morea's inhabitants.[170] Here, a "beyond" is brought about: the two narrative spaces of the novel begin to blend, symbolised by the fact that Mamette is pregnant by her Moroccan lover.

What happens in Paravion in Mamette's "dreams of cannabis or LSD" happens in Morea in the mirage: "In the mirage, Paravion was born, a play of trembling lines and swimming colours. The church towers remained silent against a background of hunchbacked clouds".[171] Mesmerised by what they perceive in the mirages, the characters in Morea begin to dream of Paravion. This dreamed-of West is a vision as much as Mamette's Morea. This is stressed by some remarkable resemblances that it bears to Muslim descriptions of paradise. One of the characters, for instance, sees a pleasure garden in his sleep when he dreams of the country to which he is planning to migrate: "orchards casted shadows on both shores. The water was fluid diamond, in which peacocks were reflected […]. He was blinded by the glitterings, bunches of peeled fruits with gleaming flesh swayed above his face".[172] The peacock is traditionally associated with paradise in Muslim cultures. Moreover, in the Koran paradise is described as follows: "Gardens underneath which rivers flow [with] plenteous shade"; "A cup from a gushing spring is brought round for them/crystal white, delicious to the drinkers"; "Wherein is fruit".[173] The dreamt Paravion of mirage and Koranic vision materialises in the central park of Amsterdam, at which the Morean migrants are leering in an earlier cited passage. Just like Mamette's room, this

170 "[C]itroenen, amandelen, sinaasappels, appels en gedroogde vijgen". Ibidem: 160-161; 184-185.

171 Hafid Bouazza, *Paravion* (2003): 59.

172 "[B]eide oevers werden beschaduwd door boomgaarden. Het water was vloeibaar diamant, waarin pauwen werden weerspiegeld […]. Hij werd verblind door glinsteringen, trossen gepelde vruchten met glanzend vlees wiegden boven zijn gezicht". Hafid Bouazza, Paravion (2003): 26.

173 4:57, 37:45-46, 55:68. This is the translation by Mohammed M. Pickthall. The second citation is slightly altered using other translations.

pleasure garden is a passage between both worlds: the shepherd flutes of the Moreans' native village can be heard there, and the women who have stayed behind in Paravion come here to pick spices.[174] Thus, the mirage – the term implies an illusion, but as a natural phenomenon it is the mirroring of an actually existing distant place – has an important synthesising function in the plot of the novel. Here, the clear imagery represents what was left implied in *Abdullah's Feet* through the offering of different reading strategies and through what was lost in the confused narrative, the abundance of stylistic forms and the impenetrable language of *Salomon*.

The hybrid world in which all of this results, is contrasted with the incapacity of the Muslim characters to develop a fluid identity – much more so than Orientalism and Occidentalism, Islam is the true antithesis of a possible approach between 'East' and 'West'. Not for nothing, the strictly Muslim Moreans do not have names – they are merely called by the professions they held in their country of origin, which seem awfully archaic in their current surroundings and stresses how misplaced these people really are: "wagoner"; "carpet salesman"; "shepherd".[175] In this respect, a description of the feelings that Mamette's Moroccan lover has for her is plainly programmed:

> Werkelijke liefde was niet de bedoeling geweest […]: een zorgvuldig gecultiveerde identiteit zou onherroepelijk bezwijken […]. Hij kon geen deel uitmaken van haar wereld, noch zij van de zijne, ondanks haar waanzinnige visioenen en buitenwereldlijke ervaringen. Wat hij niet wilde toegeven en wat hij onherroepelijk zou moeten toegeven als hij haar wensen en grillen gehoorzaamde, als hij zich liet meeslepen door haar liefde, was het besef dat hij weigerde een mentale grens te overschrijden, zijn mentale grenzen te verruimen, maar de grootste vernedering was wel dat hij er zich bewust van zou worden dat hij al die tijd, ondanks zijn immigratie, achter hetzelfde prikkeldraad gevangenzat en zou blijven.[176]
>
> True love was never intended […]; a carefully constructed identity would irrevocably yield […]. He could not be a part of her world, nor she of his, despite her crazy visions and otherworldly experiences. What he did not want to admit and what he irrevocably would have to admit if he were to yield to her wishes and whims, if he were to let himself to be dragged down by her love, was the realisation that he refused to cross a mental border, to broaden his mental borders, but the biggest humiliation was that he would become aware that, despite his migration, he had been imprisoned behind the same barbed wire all that time and would remain so.

The rigidity of this Morean contrasts with Mamette's fluid identity. The hybrid nature of the novel stresses that such a rigid sense of identity is abject. If there

174 Hafid Bouazza, *Paravion* (2003): 59: 171, 173.
175 Ibidem: passim.
176 Ibidem: 64.

are any borders between 'East' and 'West' in *Paravion*, these are the "mental borders" of the Morean characters who believe in the unchanging nature and authenticity of their own cultural identity. They are contrasted with the "crazy visions and otherworldly experiences" in which these borders fade away. Here, we recognise Abdelkader Benali's literary programme: in the fictionality of literature, the categories established by the "identity industry" can be transcended. However, with Bouazza this is not brought about by backing out of society, but by fictionalising society's definitions of 'self' and 'other', 'normal' and 'alien', by making these into illusions (or rather, exposing their illusionary character). If these worlds can blend in Amsterdam's Elysian central park and Mamette's dreamworlds, it is because they were imaginations to begin with: they were always fake and are therefore not limited by the "barbed wire" of authenticity.

5. Concluding remarks

At the beginning of *A Bear in Fur Coat*, Bouazza recounts the story of a cartoon called *The Bear That Wasn't*. A bear wakes up from hibernation and discovers that the forest in which he went to sleep has been removed and replaced by a factory. The workers tell him to get back to work, to which he answers that he cannot, because he is a bear. "You are not a bear. You're a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat", the bear is told successively by the Foreman, the General Manager, the Vice President and even the President himself. The bear is put to work and when it is time for him to go into hibernation, he is no longer able to fall asleep because he himself has come to believe that he is not a bear.[177] Four years later, Bouazza published his translation of a children's book by Frank Tashlin on which this cartoon was based.[178] At the end of this story, the president of the factory takes the bear to the zoo:

> 'Is he a *Bear*?' the President asked the zoo bears.
>
> The zoo Bears said, 'No, he isn't a Bear, because if he were a Bear, he wouldn't be outside the cage with you. He would be inside the cage with us.' […] A little baby zoo Bear said, 'I know what he is. He's a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat.'[179]

Although Bouazza does not include this part of the story in *A Bear in Fur Coat*, it is a nice parable for his ideas about freedom, which run like a thread through his op-ends, essays, interviews and literary work. Time and again, he implicitly or explicitly states that apparently there are strict rules for what it means to be a

177 Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas* (2001): 5-8.
178 Frank Tashlin, *De beer die geen beer was. Vertaald door Hafid Bouazza* (2004).
179 Frank Tashlin, *The Bear That Wasn't* (1995): 41-42.

Moroccan, Muslim or migrant author. Whoever submits to those rules can never really be free, like the bear who will only be accepted as a bear if he voluntarily enters a cage: "You can't be a Bear. Bears are only in a zoo or a circus. They're never inside a factory and that's where you are", as the President explains in *The Bear That Wasn't*.[180] This is exactly the kind of false dichotomy that deludes the eyes of the characters in Bouazza's literary work, and the caricatured readers, critics and editorial staffs in his essays. The dichotomy between Dutch authors and *allochtonous* authors, or between the Dutch and Muslims, results in a situation in which people reduce the Other to the stereotyped image of his or her "culture". In the process, both groups cultivate the alienness of the newcomers and can only see the gap between themselves and the other.

Although he does so much less openly than Kader Abdolah and Abdelkader Benali, Bouazza suggests that literature exists beyond these dichotomies – at least, his own literary work. As with Benali, literature is a "refuge" made possible by imagination. And in Bouazza's work too, we find representations of the "beyond". Read in this way, the problem that these stories try to tackle time and again is the fact that imagination is both the cage and the escape. On the one hand, the author implies that a unity is forged in his literary work. His work can therefore very well be read as a deconstruction of the notion of a clearly demarcated cultural identity. At the same time, the dichotomies that lie at the root of this identity, such as those between 'familiar' and 'alien', 'Dutch' and 'Islam', and 'Moroccan' and 'Dutch', are exaggerated sarcastically and presented as inevitable. We see this in *A Bear in Fur Coat* too, when Bouazza claims that "most critics" call him a "Moroccan writer": factually an inaccuracy, but one that does contribute to the suggestion that the freedom and the unconditional individualism that the author says he is aiming at is only possible in an ironic play with prejudices, the ridiculing of the silliness of the Dutch and the backwardness of Muslims. Bouazza's irony contains a certain arrogance, both in his essays about literature and society and in his literary work: the wrongs of society are obvious and a source of amusement for the author and that part of his audience who 'gets it', while the rest of the Netherlands will never 'get it' – and is, ultimately, made part of the joke.

This is in line with Bouazza's decadent authorial *posture*, just like the ambiguity that we see in both his writings on society and literature and his literary work. Although he makes all kinds of provoking remarks about controversial issues, an ironic tone ensures that almost everything he says is placed between quotation marks – and is thus never unambiguously his opinion. This can be discerned in the way in which he deals with the most important theme in his work,

180 Ibidem: 36.

the "delusions of the eye". On the one hand, there is a vicious attack on the obscurity that is brought about by the "alien gaze" and the exoticising gaze. They lead to an inability to "see people instead of Muslims", an individual style instead of a migrant author's generic work full of homesickness and palm trees, or the "Western enemy" instead of friendly Dutch neighbours. Such collective *image*-inations of the Other are the main targets of many of Bouazza's writings. Both Islam and cultural relativism (which is, paradoxically, described as an essentialist way of dealing with the culture of the Other by the author) are presented as ideologies that cultivate thinking in terms of 'familiar' and 'alien' and 'self' and 'other', which make any form of individual freedom impossible. The latter becomes increasingly important in Bouazza's contributions to the public debate. His tone is much harsher when he speaks about society rather than literature, which can be observed most clearly when we compare the two different versions of *A Bear in Fur Coat*. In the first edition, which is mainly concerned with literature, he merely turns against the notion of an "alien gaze" in a rather ironic, playful way. In the second edition, on the other hand, he notes that when one considers the 'backwardness' of some Muslims, it is not that strange that the Dutch suspect such a gaze among them.

The need for, but virtual impossibility of, individual freedom is an important issue in Bouazza's literary work as well. In the way I have read them, his stories are a form of social satire. When Bouazza writes about relationships between Muslims and Dutch, his characters are caricatures, sometimes grotesques: silly, vicious, extremely naïve or extremely manipulative. Just like his social criticism, his literary representations read like attacks on Islam: this religion is presented as the main obstacle to change and thus the kind of encounter where one could, by reimagining oneself and the other, reach beyond the deformation of what I have called *image*-ination. The result is that one could live intimately together with someone who remains an alien.

Bouazza makes this living together as strangers a loaded affair by adapting discourses that criticise the oppression and discrimination of the non-Western Other in his descriptions. The remark that Humayd must adjust to his "new homeland", The Turk's racism and the othering of Muslim characters by Dutch characters could give the impression that Bouazza's literary work is an emancipatory project in which the power relations within Dutch society are being questioned. However, his method for constructing his stories, with unreliable narrators, unstable and grotesque fictional worlds, and the way in which his texts can be read as parodies on orientalist and exotist discourses make such an unambiguous reading impossible. The supposed need for emancipation itself is as much ridiculed as is the way in which Dutch society treats its Muslims.

Thus, there is a fundamental ambiguity in Bouazza's representation of the imagination of the Other, which we could call Madam Split's Janus head. As we have seen, Madam Split is on the one hand a caricature of the kind of silly readers Bouazza likes to ridicule, while on the other hand, she is "indispensable". It is precisely the obscurity of vision that she stands for that enables the ironic play with collective *image*-inations such as stereotypes and prejudices. This is a deconstruction from within, a play with masks and lies, such as the use of presumably authentic Easter fairy tales in *A Bear in Fur Coat*. Similarly, Bouazza's literary work seems to be exactly the kind of Orientalist exuberance that one would expect from an 'authentic' migrant author. However, by using irony and grotesques, Bouazza creates a style and a fictional world in which the difference between fake and authenticity disappears. Thus, any dichotomy is disrupted from the very start. In this way, the Other's coerced authenticity, the Orientalist and Occidentalist fantasies are ironically – and at times cynically – exaggerated *ad absurdum*. As aesthetic techniques, they lead to a literal *alien*ation. This ambiguity is one of the most important characteristics of Bouazza's work, of much more consequence than an unmasking or exposing of the mutual stereotyping.

Once again, this is in line with Bouazza's decadentism: what the author at first presents as something that needs to be escaped, is ultimately celebrated in baroque hyperboles. The cage that divides human from bear is not destroyed, but made into an aesthetic experience. In spite (or, rather, because) of all the ambiguity, irony and cynicism, a clear position taking can be discerned here. This goes back to the difference between the two functions of imagination in Bouazza's writings: the reducing to an image of an Other and the creative, aesthetic imagination. The first ultimately leads to stagnation, to an inability or even unwillingness to change and adapt. Despite Bouazza's often protested view that literature does not have a social function, his work has a programmed character whenever he makes this point. The descriptions of the mental seclusion that Mamette's Moroccan lover voluntarily embraces are an example of this. They read as an illustration of Bouazza's claim that Islam and its notion of cultural identity are obstacles for the individual freedom that Bouazza propagates. The conclusion that can be drawn from his stories is that anyone who sees identity as something unchangeable will inevitably end up in a relationship of strife and rivalry with the Other. In this event, the one who does not offer enough resistance will ultimately lose. Imagination then becomes destructive. This change is embraced, however, with the second form of imagination. Deformation here means creativity: everything is alienated and thus the difference between 'familiar' and 'self' as norm and 'alien' and 'other' as deviation disappears.

6. Robert Anker

[T]here's rich material there for writers. But, I suspect, not for white ones.

Salman Rushdie

1. Islam and the West as Capulets and Montagues

The publication of Robert Anker's *Hajar and Daan* (*Hajar en Daan*, 2004), a novel about a star-crossed love affair between a Dutch history teacher and his Moroccan pupil, was the first time since Huub Beurskens's *Leila* (1991) that a critically acclaimed white Dutch author had published a literary work in which the central theme was the encounter between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. However, the subject of *Hajar and Daan* did not come as a complete surprise to those who knew Anker's earlier works. In previous poems, short stories and novels, the author had dealt with the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands. In addition, this author had often inserted controversial social issues into his work and, in 2004, the relationship between 'the Dutch' and 'Muslims' was about the most controversial issue available.

Just as with Benali and Bouazza, there is a tension between this eagerness to deal with social issues and the author's opinion that literature should be about the 'purely literary' instead of moral or political questions. Anker solved this by claiming that he inserts social issues into his work first and foremost for strictly literary reasons: the author claimed that the confrontation in a literary work with what is controversial in society intensifies the reading experience, which increases the reading pleasure. And yet, paradoxically, Anker also spoke of an author's moral duty to make his readers think by dealing with controversial issues. When he does so, he resembles the same kind of engaged author as Abdolah. As mentioned in the introduction, Anker ultimately took up a middle position between Benali and Bouazza on one hand and Abdolah on the other.

In his study on engagement in contemporary Dutch literature, Dutch literary critic Thomas Vaessens linked the fact that Anker deals with issues such as the relations between 'Muslims' and 'the Dutch' in his poetry and novels with the author's biography:

> Ever since *Good Manners* (1998), Anker […] has continuously written about his own background (the boy who was torn from the inspired village context and had to find a sustainable morality in the postmodern city), and this biographical wallpaper forms the background against which Anker raises all kinds of social issues.[1]

1 "Sinds Goede manieren (1989) schrijft Anker […] voortdurend over zijn eigen achtergrond (de uit het bezielde dorpsverband losgerukte jongen moet in de postmoderne stad op

I agree with Vaessens' notion that Anker's biography is important to his work and will expand on this subject in my analyses in this chapter. Anker himself has said that his migration from the West Frisian village of Oostwoud to Amsterdam was as radical as the migration made by Turks and Moroccans when they came to the Netherlands as guest workers. In his contributions to the public debate, he repeatedly mentions this comparison, presenting his own successful adaptation to the "postmodern city" as an example for Muslim migrants – an example which he problematises in his literary work, interestingly enough.

At first, Anker's migration to the city led to what one could call 'poetry of homesickness': still nature poetry that evoked the atmosphere of 'back then'. Later, Anker contrasted realistic images of the deterioration, the chaos and the seamy side of the city with the peace and quiet of the village. However, a longing for the village never really disappeared from his work. Especially in his prose, it is striking how his stories tend to end with a return to a lost Arcadia. In a 2002 interview, Anker admitted that his work testifies to a longing to "come home in a familiar world, but that is an impossible longing".[2] Thus, his stories end with the mental or physical return of a "boy who has been torn loose from the inspired village context" to the places of his youth, after he discovers that a "sustainable morality" and the authenticity that is needed for it cannot be found in the "postmodern city".

Here as well, Anker takes a position between Abdolah on one hand and Benali and Bouazza on the other. While the notion of authenticity forms the fundament for Abdolah's work, Benali and Bouazza celebrate the impossibility of authenticity with their odes to lying. Anker's stories seems to admit that authenticity is no longer an option – he presents the notion of homecoming as an unattainable dream or describes it with ironic distance – but at the same time he continues to stress the necessity of an authentic life.

A possible source of this necessary but impossible authenticity is Islam, which increasingly functions similarly to the village in Anker's work. Although Anker's poetry and prose first strongly linked Muslims to city life – as soon as he began to write about the city, Muslim characters entered his work – their role becomes more ambiguous when Anker is more emphatically dealing with the

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zoek naar een houdbare moraal), en dat biografische behang vormt de achtergrond waartegen Anker ook in zijn romans allerlei maatschappelijke kwesties aan de orde stelt." Thomas Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman* (2009): 203. I would say Vaessens places the breach in Anker's oeuvre too late; from his second collection of poetry, *Nieuwe veters* (1993), onwards, this has been the case in Anker's work, overwhelmingly so from *Nieuwe veters* (1987) onwards.

2 "[I]k heb altijd willen thuiskomen in een vertrouwde wereld, maar dat is een onmogelijk verlangen." Cited in Kester Freriks, "Schrijven als een dom kind" (2002).

multicultural society. They are part of cosmopolitan life in the big city on one hand, while fulfilling the role of a village element on the other. When this happens, we find the same attitude towards Islam as towards the village: both are 'unspoiled' by the decadence and the deterioration of the city, but also something that belongs to 'back then' – that can even be considered backwards.

Just as in the work of the other three authors discussed in this study, in Anker's work 'Islam' and 'the West' confront one other in strife. At first this was neutralised when Anker suggested that the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands was not really a threat. His characters, who have morally and emotionally lost their way, merely experience it that way. This changed in *Hajar and Daan*, where the love affair at the heart of this novel is presented as a variation on *Romeo and Juliet*. Here, the West and Islam have become like the Montagues and Capulets, inevitably set to fight each other: the clash of civilisations is a serious matter this time, instead of a feverishly imagined threat that haunts an immoral character. Unlike Shakespeare's famous play, however, only one of the battling 'families' is the aggressor, namely Islam. 'The Muslim danger' is omnipresent in *Hajar and Daan*. However, in the way I read this novel, the text's point of view ultimately remains quite ambiguous. When the Dutch main character has his authentic experience – a typical element in Anker's work – he finds wholeness and village simplicity in Morocco and in Islam. It remains unclear whether this is a genuflection for a 'backwards' culture, the end of a deluded downward spiral into false authenticity and Orientalist prejudices, or a valuable return to a sense of wholeness.

2. Short biography and publication overview

Robert Anker was born in 1947 in Oostwoud. At the age of 21, he moved to Amsterdam to run a cigar shop and study Dutch. Together with friends he founded a theatre group and wrote a number of plays that he has said were inspired by Pinter, Beckett and, especially, Artaud. After the group split up, he began writing poetry. From 1977 onwards, his poems were published in several prestigious Dutch magazines. Anker also started working as a Dutch teacher at the Amstellyceum in Amsterdam.

In 1979 his debut was published, containing nature poetry. The symbolic, introverted poems of his first collection were gradually replaced by poetry about the outside world in his two following collections, published in 1983 and 1987. This transformation culminated in a long epic poem, *Good Manners* (*Goede manieren*, 1989), in which extensive descriptions of inner city life and big city chaos take centre stage.

Although Anker is the least known of the authors of this study, his work can certainly be called successful. Critics have praised him from his debut onwards. They have always evaluated Anker's style positively, a style that the author himself once described as his "stammer syntax": he uses many subordinate clauses without a clear main clause, with seemingly random enjambments. The reception of the increasing presence of scenes of modern big city life in his poetry was equally positive. For his second collection of poetry, he received the Jan Campert Prize and his third collection of poetry won the Herman Gorter Prize, both prestigious Dutch poetry awards.

In addition to poetry, Anker wrote poetical essays and art criticism. These essays have been collected in two books: *Elephant Behind Block* (*Olifant achter blok*, 1988) and *Forgotten Light* (*Vergeten licht*, 1993). He was part of several important literary juries (e.g. the Multatuli Prize, the P.C. Hooft Prize and the Busken Huet Prize), was an editor of *Tirade* (one of the foremost Dutch literary magazines) between 1988 and 1995 and was a prose critic for the daily newspaper *Het Parool*.

In the 1990s, Anker began publishing prose. In 1992, *Captain Rob's Homecoming* (*De thuiskomst van kapitein Rob*), a collection of two novellas and a letter by the author to a young Robert Anker, was published. He received the Bordewijk Award for this prose debut. In 1994, this was followed by a collection of short stories, *Completely Detuned Piano* (*Volledig ontstemde piano*) and in 1998 he published his first novel, *Vrouwenzand*. In his prose he made the same movement as he made before in his poetry. *Captain Rob's Homecoming* deals mainly with a youth in a small village and the collection of short stories and the novel are set in the busy, chaotic and often dangerous big city: Amsterdam with its junkies, squatters and yuppies. Meanwhile, Anker kept writing poetry: in 1996, he published *In the Room* (*In het vertrek*[3]) and in 2002, *Pants Flapped Man* (*De broekbewapperde mens*).

In 2001, Anker published his second novel, *A Sort of England* (*Een soort Engeland*), which was awarded the Libris Literature Prize. A play called *Is This England?* (*Is dit Engeland?*) was published in 2003; as Anker wrote in an afterword, he had sent it to several theatre companies but it was never produced. This play was part of the Bantammer series from De Buitenkant publishing house and was the first of Anker's works not to be published by his regular publishing house, Querido. The following year, Querido published Anker's third novel, *Hajar and Daan*. Reviews in newspapers and magazines were mostly positive about Anker's prose for the same reasons as his poetry: they praised his style and his ability to integrate different discourses in his texts, varying from the

3 This title could also be translated as *While Leaving*.

drivel of *nouveaux riches* to the garbled Dutch of immigrants. Anker was also praised for creating a striking portrait of contemporary society by taking up all kinds of social issues in his text, such as the Amsterdam squatter riots of the 1980s and a widespread corruption scandal involving Dutch police in the early 1990s.

In 2005, Anker retired from teaching and quit working as a newspaper critic to concentrate on his prose and poetry. It seems that he felt the urge to take stock of his life: in 2005, both *Inner Speed* (*Innerlijke vaart*) and *Nine Lives* (*Negen levens*) were published. The first was called a "summer diary" and the second "a village as self-portrait", but both of them read like the author's memoirs. In *Nine Lives*, Anker wrote about his early youth, up to the moment he began secondary school. In *Inner Speed*, the author looked back upon his years as a student and his working life from the vantage point of the summer of 2005.

3. Man of the world

The migration from village to city not only determined the themes of Anker's literary work, but his opinions on literature and society as well. In interviews and essays, he has claimed that moving to the city incited him to be an engaged writer. Several times, Anker has said that the confrontation with tough life in the big city continuously convinces him that he must deal with this in his literary work. Having embraced city life himself, he tends to propagate a cosmopolitan lifestyle in his comments on social issues. Everyone who does not want to stay behind should follow his example: move from the village to the city and exchange religion, hominess and familiarity for modern life with its uncertainties. He presents this as the solution for the difficulties Muslims are having with integrating into Dutch society. After discussing Anker's conception of literature in Section 2.1., I will analyse his op-eds in Section 2.2.

3.1. Engagement and the city

In his summer diary *Inner Speed*, Anker claimed that "the raw images of the big city" play an increasingly important role in his work. This is so because the author is acutely aware that the city is "the place where we have to live, 'have to' indeed, if one wants to keep up to date, and by god, I wanted to, and I want to".[4] At the same time, the city is also a threatening space for Anker. He wants to problematise this in his work:

4 "[D]e grote stad als de plaats waar wij moeten wonen, 'moeten' ja, als je bij de tijd wil blijven en bij god, dat wilde ik en wil ik." Robert Anker, *Innerlijke vaart* (2005): 178-179.

> I began to look around me, here, in a big city like Amsterdam. I saw the homeless, the junkies, squatters, the outcasts living in the margins of society. I couldn't help it but that made a big impact on me. So the range of my outlook necessitated a broadening of my style.[5]

This focus on big city life fits with Anker's *posture* of being a 'man of the world'. Just like Thomas Vaessens (cited above), Anker presents the confrontation with the big city as the reason for what he calls his "engagement": "The harshness with which city life impacts my mind is a fact with which I will have to live. I see it as a mission to come clean with that."[6] However, engagement does not imply the propagating of a message for Anker, nor a kind of literary journalism. The author shows his engagement – even has the duty to show engagement – by commenting on social issues in his work and thus making the reader think.

Critics have reacted positively to Anker's attempts to integrate the city into his work through his style and themes. They claim that modern (city) life is strikingly reflected in the polyphony of his work. For example, one critic wrote about *Hajar and Daan*: "Anker has always been a writer […] who did not lock out the world and the street noise, but took them in, including the language that comes with them. He likes his imagination polluted by reality […]. The novel is a melting pot of milieus."[7] Similarly, critics have praised the many references to contemporary reality and social issues in Anker's work. Writing about the same novel, another critic favourably called Anker a "chronicler and commentator of his times".[8]

Surprisingly enough, Anker has expressly resisted that last conclusion. A year after that review was published, Anker wrote a programmed essay, "On the

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5 "[I]k begon om mij heen te kijken, hier, in een grote stad als Amsterdam. Ik zag de straatzwervers, junks, krakers, de verschoppelingen levend in de marge van de samenleving. Dat sloeg bij mij hard in, daar kan ik niets aan doen. Dus de reikwijdte van mijn blikveld eiste de verbreding van mijn stijl." Cited in Kester Freriks, "Schrijven als een dom kind" (2002).

6 "[E]ngagement"; "De hardheid waarmee het stadse leven inslaat op mijn gemoed, is een gegeven waarmee ik te leven heb. Ik beschouw het als een opdracht daarmee in het reine te komen." Ibidem. In the same interview, the author added that he feels this sounds a bit pretentious.

7 "Anker is altijd een schrijver geweest […] die de wereld en het straatrumoer niet buitensloot maar juist binnenhaalde en ook de taal die daarbij hoort. Hij houdt van een verbeelding die flink vervuild wordt door de werkelijkheid, en van spreektaal met ongekamd haar […] De roman is een smeltkroes van milieus." Tom van Deel, "Haar standvastigheid, haar lieftalligheid" (2004).

8 "[C]hroniqueur en commentator van zijn eigen tijd". Arnold Heumakers, "Thuis in andermans land. Een spetterend, realistisch liefdessprookje van Robert Anker" (2004).

Zeitgeist in Dutch Prose", in which he claimed that a novel is first and foremost "an autonomous world" which "only exists in the sentences of that book". He added:

> If we keep that in mind, we understand how ridiculous it is to reduce an author to 'chronicler of his times' merely because he does not set the activities of his characters against a neutral scene in an unspecified time […] but, just to give an example, against a background of the squatter's movement and organised crime, the modern theatre, the nightlife of our capital and the corruption of education. Such an author is not a chronicler – he is no journalist! – but someone who tries to summon reality as well as possible.[9]

It is striking that Anker turned against this specific critic (albeit implicitly). After all, in the same review, he was also called a "commentator of his times" and this is very much in line with what Anker said about his own work three years earlier:

> One should aim for something with one's book. The reader must understand that there is something at stake. One's truth should become clear, how one feels about things, how you as an organism react to society […]. The book in its turn is an organism as well, which goes about in the world and with which the reader is confronted. That reader will have to react to it, position himself […].[10]

In his 2005 essay, he formulated this idea even more strongly. Not only should reality be summoned, but the author should aim to confront his reader as well:

> I believe there is something to say in favour of considering an evocation of reality and thus of the Zeitgeist to be a moral duty, because it confronts us with the world in

9 "Als wij dat voor ogen houden, dan begrijpen we hoe onzinnig het is een auteur te reduceren tot 'chroniqueur van zijn tijd', alleen maar omdat hij de handelingen van zijn personages niet plaatst in een neutraal decor en een onbepaalde tijd […] maar tegen de achtergrond van kraakbeweging en georganiseerde misdaad, van het moderne toneel, het hoofdstedelijke uitgaansleven en de verloedering van het onderwijs – ik noem maar eens wat. Die auteur is geen chroniqueur – hij is geen journalist! – maar iemand die de werkelijkheid zo echt mogelijk wil oproepen." Robert Anker, "Een romanschrijver is geen chroniqueur - over de tijdgeest in het Nederlandse proza" (2005). Anker refers here to his own novels. The first, *Vrouwenzand*, was set against a background of "the squatter's movement and organised crime"; the second, *A Sort of England*, was about "the modern theatre". *Hajar and Daan* extensively sketches "the nightlife of [the Dutch] capital and the corruption of education".

10 "Je moet wel iets met je boek willen. Dat de lezer in de gaten heeft dat er iets op het spel staat. Jouw waarheid moet er uit naar voren komen, hoe jij in het leven staat, hoe jij als organisme reageert op de maatschappij […]. Het boek is dan ook weer een organisme dat zich door de wereld beweegt en waarmee de lezer geconfronteerd wordt. Die lezer moet daarop reageren, zijn standpunt bepalen." Cited in Maarten Moll, "Robert Anker is een goede schrijver. Interview met Libris-Laureaat" (2002).

> which we have to live in the intensified way of art, in the alienating way too, which forces us to think about it.[11]

What Anker seems to claim here is that he does not propagate a message in his work, but attempts to enter into a dialogue with his reader and elicit a reaction from his reader. According to Anker, this does not mean that the author must spread a specific message: "the writer does not have a message. Anything with a message ceases to be literature."[12]

To comment does not mean that he offers solutions for social issues. Much like Bouazza, Anker denies that this should be a task for literature. In a polemic with Benali, who in September 2002 rebuked Dutch authors for not paying attention to the problems of multicultural society, Anker wrote:

> It is an old but persistent misunderstanding that a writer has to speak out about political and social issues. The writer has no duty to do anything in this respect […]. The only task a writer has is to write a book that causes a 'tingle between the shoulder blades' (Nabokov).[13]

So if Anker decides to write an essay about social issues, he stresses that he does this as a "citizen" and not as a "writer".[14] However, the question remains why he deals with and comments upon all kinds of "political and social issues" in his work when he feels that an author has no obligation to do so. In the programmed essay mentioned before, he claimed that his social comment first and foremost had an aesthetic function. For instance, about his choice to write about the multicultural tensions in Dutch society in *Hajar and Daan*, he said: "I describe this background extensively, if only because it represents the world in ferment with its quite dangerous differences, which the protagonists must see to maintain their passionate love".[15] Thus, integrating social issues in literary work is one of the

11 "[I]k geloof dat er wat voor te zeggen valt de evocatie van de werkelijkheid en dus van het tijdsbeeld, ook als een morele plicht te beschouwen omdat het ons op de verhevigde wijze van kunst, op de vervreemdende wijze ook, die ons nieuwe ogen geeft, confronteert met de wereld waarin wij moeten leven en dat dwingt tot nadenken." Robert Anker, "Een romanschrijver is geen chroniqueur - over de tijdgeest in het Nederlandse proza" (2005).

12 "[D]e schrijver heeft geen boodschap. Alles met een boodschap is geen literatuur." Cited in Maarten Moll, "Robert Anker is een goede schrijver" (2002).

13 "Het is een oud maar hardnekkig misverstand dat een schrijver zich zou moeten uitspreken over politieke en maatschappelijke problemen. De schrijver moet helemaal niets op dit terrein […]. De enige taak van de schrijver is het schrijven van een boek dat bij de lezer 'een tinteling tussen de schouderbladen' (Nabokov) veroorzaakt." Robert Anker, "Spring maar achterop" (2002).

14 "[B]urger"; "schrijver". Ibidem.

15 "Die achtergrond wordt alleen al hierom uitvoerig door mij beschreven omdat het de gistende wereld verbeeldt met zijn niet ongevaarlijke tegenstellingen waarbinnen de

techniques through which the author can create "a tingle between the shoulder blades". Apparently, the strained relationship between 'the Dutch' and 'Muslims' and the heated public debate about the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands are interesting for the author because they are such loaded subjects. They make it clear to the reader that "something is at stake". The author seems to imply that this creates a stronger involvement with the characters.

However, the remark about literature's "moral duty" to make the reader think about "the world in which they have to live", cited above, suggests that the readers' involvement must go beyond an aesthetic experience. The notion of "moral duty" implies, after all, that there is also an ethical dimension to all of this. With that, the extent to which the fictional world of a literary work can truly be an "autonomous world" is being relativised. We also saw this with Bouazza: the world in the literary work can only have a certain effect on the reader *because* it is derived from – and therefore, like any representation, is a comment upon[16] – the world outside the book.

3.2. The city and migration

Just like in his essays and interviews about literature, the notion that city life must be embraced plays an important role in Anker's op-eds about the presence of Muslims in Dutch society. Anker asserts that the city and the post-religious society it implies represent the best way of life: they have changed Dutch society for the better and they will ultimately solve the problems that surround the presence of Muslim immigrants. However, Anker significantly changed his opinion on how this will happen. Before 9/11, the author assumed that the assimilation of Muslims into the postmodern city would happen by itself because Muslim culture does not really differ from the culture of rural Dutch migrants who have already gone through this process. After 9/11, he presented the integration of Muslim *allochtones* as much more problematic. They needed to be forced to give up their "backwards culture" – or, in any case, the Dutch would have to show them how to do so.

This shift in Anker's worldview was quick. In the spring of 2001, he wrote an essay about the theme of that year's Book Week, which has been mentioned several times throughout this study: "writing between two cultures". The drift of his argument was that the problems concerning minorities in the Netherlands were not as bad as some would say:

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protagonisten de hevige liefde overeind moeten zien te houden". Robert Anker, "Een romanschrijver is geen chroniqueur - over de tijdgeest in het Nederlandse proza" (2005).

16 Cf. Chapter 2, Section 4.

> Islam! That is quite a backwards culture, as people cry, forgetting that the prejudices of this culture strongly resemble our own in the fifties […]. It is a matter of time. My mother-in-law, who belonged to a rigidly orthodox Protestant denomination as a child, put on a brown stocking in front of the minister and asked whether this really was not permitted (it was permitted). Similarly, one can now see the so-called modern headscarf on the streets: not tied beneath the chin, but backwards, underneath the ears. Does the imam allow this?[17]

Anker is referring to the so-called 'black stockings church' here, a very strict Protestant denomination in the Netherlands that did not allow frivolities such as stockings in any other colour than black (hence the name). According to the author, what could be said about "the first generation of immigrants [who] arrived from their Berber or Anatolian villages in a bemusement they would never get over" held true for many of the people from the countryside who moved to the city in the 1950s.[18] He describes how they, just like today's immigrants, only had contact with each other, shopped in stores run by people from the same region and lived together in quarters they rarely left, while stubbornly continuing to speak their own languages or dialects. It was "quite multicultural, but it was not a tragedy, at least it wasn't called one. Now it is."[19]

As described in the introduction to this study, around the time Anker wrote this essay there was a strong backlash against the notion that a multicultural society would be possible.[20] The author clearly reacted to claims that the integration of Muslims in Dutch society had failed. He did not claim that people who said so were wrong, but rather that the problems would not turn out to be quite as bad as people seemed to think. Over the years, these minorities would go through the same process as the country people from the 1950s, among whom there are still many who have not really managed to assimilate into the city an-

17 "De islam! Dat is toch een tamelijk achterlijke cultuur. Roept men, vergetend dat die cultuur in haar vooroordelen sterk lijkt op de onze in de jaren vijftig […]. Het is een kwestie van tijd. Mijn schoonmoeder, als kind behorend tot de zwartekousenkerk, trok een keer ten overstaan van een dominee een bruine kous aan met de vraag of dat nou niet mocht (het mocht). Zo zie je op straat al vaak de zogenaamde moderne hoofddoek: niet dichtgebonden onder de kin maar onder de oren naar achteren. Mag dat van de imam?" Robert Anker, "Mijn dorp als mythisch gebied" (2001).

18 "[D]e immigranten van de eerste generatie arriveerden vanuit hun Berberse of Anatolische dorpen in een verbijstering die ze nooit te boven zouden komen." Ibidem.

19 "Erg multicultureel, maar een drama was het geloof ik niet, werd het althans niet genoemd." Ibidem. With this comment, Anker refers to the infamous essay "The Multicultural Tragedy" ("Het multiculturele drama") by Paul Scheffer, which has been mentioned several times in this study. Cf. the introduction, p. 10.

20 Cf. the introduction to his study, p. 9-11.

yway: “there might very well be a few hundred thousand antisocial Dutch plebs who have not integrated well, as far as I am concerned”.[21]

This differs significantly from his reply to Benali, which was published one and a half years later, in September 2002. In this op-ed, Anker strongly criticised “the leftist church”, a loaded term that was mostly used by right-wing populist politicians such as the then-recently murdered Pim Fortuyn. The connotation of this term was that a supposedly progressive, overly ‘politically correct’ elite was responsible for weakening Dutch society in the face of threats from mass immigration. According to Anker, this “leftist church” had gone very far “in what we could easily call the denial of the presence of hundreds of thousands of Muslims”. Apparently, Anker changed his opinion after 9/11 and the spectacular rise of politicians who were strongly critical of Islam and Muslims in its aftermath. He then claimed that the integration of *allochtones*, a term which he seemed to exclusively use for Muslims, had gone wrong from the very beginning:

> If […] we would have had any *real* respect for them, we should have said: Welcome. If you learn the language quickly, you will receive a Dutch passport. And as for that backwards culture of yours, that has to stop − we have just gotten rid of it ourselves […] and we like it much better that way. And know this: we will deal harshly with any misdemeanour.[22]

Here, Anker’s tone was much more vigilant and quite paternalistic. He turned against the kind of cultural relativism (against the notion, for instance, that Dutch culture is as “backwards” as Muslim culture), which arguably could be found in his own 2001 op-ed. He encouraged *allochtones* “to become Dutch”, which mainly seems to imply that they have to give up their religion. And the Dutch needed to be proud of their own culture:

> We should be proud of our Western culture. We should become proud people who do not mumble about respect […] for another culture which we tacitly find to be backwards. We should, however, not beat them up with their backwardness – indeed, ‘look at yourself’, especially if one were to go back thirty years – but offer them a recipe and in any possible way help them to enter the superior Western culture […]. A society in which religion is pushed back into the private sphere and even

21 “[E]r zijn misschien wel een paar honderdduizend asociale onbeschofte Hollandse patjepeeërs die wat mij betreft ook niet geïntegreerd zijn.” Robert Anker, “Mijn dorp als mythisch gebied” (2001).

22 “Als we écht respect […] voor ze hadden gehad, hadden we gezegd: welkom, als je gauw de taal leert, krijg je een Nederlands paspoort, en voor de rest is het afgelopen met die achterlijke cultuur van jullie, die hebben we net zelf afgeschaft […] en dat bevalt ons veel beter. En denk erom: ontsporingen pakken we hard aan.” Robert Anker, “Spring maar achterop” (2002).

> there will ultimately become superfluous. […] Enter, *Allochtone*! Dare to embrace our freedom![23]

The way in which Anker here exposed "cultural relativism" as ultimately hypocritical strongly resembles Bouazza's ideas on the subject.[24] However, in this op-ed the same appeal can be found as in Anker's earlier one, albeit presented from quite a different angle: an appeal to exchange 'backwardness' for a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle, as the author himself had once done.

4. Encounters with Muslims in Anker's literary work

As I mentioned earlier, Muslims entered Robert Anker's work together with the city. They are often presented in stereotypical ways, for instance as a cleaner in Anker's second collection of poetry, *New Shoestrings* (*Nieuwe veters*, 1983).[25] Muslim characters in Anker's texts should be seen as an intrinsic part of the big city chaos, most notably from *Good Manners* (1989) onwards. The main character of this "episodic poem" is regularly confronted with the disorder of city life. In passages that are made up of long enumerations, the overwhelming multitude of the city is stressed. Foreigners, mostly Moroccans, Turks and Surinamese, are recurring elements that are juxtaposed with snack bars, rioting hooligans, toothless alcoholics, dying homeless people and other big city particulars.[26] In one of these enumerations, he paid specific attention to the Muslim faith:

> Uit een trapdeur komt een Turks gezin. In streepjespak voorop
> de vader, vijf kinderen, de moeder achteraan.
> Als een kameel loopt de man door de woestijn van het westen.
> Allah houdt hem groot, wij zijn maar klein hier zonder matje,
> maar groter is de ruggegraat van eigen makelij, de ratio
> die ons behoedt maar wat ons samenhield gebroken heeft.
>
> Out of a door comes a Turkish family. Leading in striped costume:
> the father, five children, the mother in the rear.
> Like a camel the man walks through the desert of the West

23 "We moeten trots zijn op onze westerse cultuur. We moeten fiere mensen worden die niet mompelen over respect […] voor een andere cultuur die we stilzwijgend achterlijk vinden. We moeten ze echter ook niet met hun achterlijkheid om hun oren slaan – inderdaad, kijk naar je eige, zeker als je dertig jaar teruggaat – maar ze een recept aanbieden en ze met alles te helpen toe te treden tot de superieure westerse cultuur […]. Een samenleving waarin de godsdienst steeds verder teruggedrongen wordt tot de privésfeer en zelfs daar uiteindelijk overbodig wordt bevonden. […] Treed toe, Allochtoon! Durf onze vrijheid aan!" Ibidem.

24 See the last chapter, p. 156-157

25 Robert Anker, *Nieuwe veters* (1983): 8.

26 Robert Anker, *Goede manieren* (1989): 26; 29.

> Allah keeps him great, we are but small here without a mat,
> but greater is the homemade spine, the ratio
> that preserves us but has broken what kept us together.[27]

The Muslim faith is presented here as an alternative to the individualist existence of an "us". (Is it the narrator of this epic poem and his *narrative audience*? The poet and his audience? The Dutch in general?) However, this alternative is then immediately rejected: 'our' way of life, without God but rational, is ultimately better, even though it has resulted in the loss of a feeling of solidarity.

Thus, Muslims fulfil two roles in *Good Manners*. On the one hand, they are part of the "street noise" in Anker's work, the modern life in the big city, which is painted quite negatively as deteriorating and threatening. On the other hand, their faith is actually an (unacceptable!) alternative to modern life with its fragmentation and sense of being uprooted.

We can find these same two roles in the works that Anker wrote between 1990 and 2005. In these stories, it is striking to see how Muslims and Islam are linked with the most important dichotomy in Anker's work, the one between village and city. They are an inextricable part of the city, but within the city they actually represent the village, a return to a more uncomplicated existence of God and commandments. A recurring notion in these stories is the fear that "they" (viz. the Muslims) will take over the Netherlands.

In Section 4.1., I will discuss how up until 2003, Anker mainly ascribed this fear to unsympathetic characters: white men going through a midlife crisis and who fear a loss of social status and masculinity. However, in *Hajar and Daan* (2004), which I will discuss extensively in Section 4.2., the representation of Islam as a threat to the good life is much more ambiguous. In this novel, Muslims cherish an enormous hatred towards the West. Although the stereotypical image of a violent Islam is nuanced, there seems to be a certain empathy, at least, with the Western fear of Islam. At the same time, Islam plays a positive role as a village-like element in the postmodern world of contemporary Western society in the plot of *Hajar and Daan*.

This has to do with the fact that, to a large extent, Anker's literary work resembles the kind of 'literature of homesickness' that is usually associated with migrant authors. This is much truer for Anker than it is for migrant authors such as Benali. In Benali's work, the city chaos is dealt with light-heartedly and the notion of a 'homecoming' is ridiculed; in contrast, it is a serious element in Anker's stories. The "man without qualities", as the author described the typical main character of his novels, has his origins in the village and has lost a sense of 'wholeness' in the fragmented life of the city. As said before, the stories normal-

27 Ibidem: 30-31.

ly end with a return to the authenticity of the village, which in *Hajar and Daan* was replaced by Islam and an 'Eastern' world, albeit not without a certain ironic distance.

4.1. City, village and Islam

The "man without qualities" in Anker's work represents an experience of the city as a space where the deterioration and the poor but numerous population could at any moment become 'too much'. Migrants from Muslim countries play a double role in this experience. As part of the ethnic melting pot, they represent a group of city people who are seen as powerless by the main characters, who fear they will end up being a part of this group. As members of the Muslim faith, however, they represent a powerful factor in the city that is experienced as threatening by the same main characters. However, because this fear only exists in the experience of unsympathetic and pitiful characters, it is, as Dutch literary theorist Maaike Meijer calls it, "embedded": the text as a whole seems to reject this fear of the Other and the authorial audience is clearly expected to realise that it is being presented as abject.[28] In this section I will discuss how this happens in three prose works that contain representations of encounters between 'Dutch' and 'Muslims': the collection of short stories *Completely Detuned Piano* and the novels *Vrouwenzand* and *A Sort of England*.

4.1.1. Village boys and men from the city

Long descriptions of city chaos such as the ones in Anker's epic poem *Good Manners* form a returning motif in his prose. These are mostly vocalised through the main character, who himself is no part of what he merely observes: the big city with its ethnic variety, smells, noise, drugs and dirt. An early example can be found in the story "Bull's-eye. Röder" ("Raak. Röder"):

> O god, de apenrots, dacht hij toen hij vanuit zijn straat de hoek omsloeg. De apenrots van de puberteit […]. Een Javaanse, scherp gesneden gezicht, had met gesloten ogen haar wang tegen de schouder van een roodharige, druk besproette jongen gevlijd, die zijn hoofd heen en weer bewoog op het gespetter en gesis dat uit zijn walkman kwam. Twee Marokkaanse jongens in glanzende trainingspakken reden op een scootertje voorbij waar keiharde bonkende muziek uit opsteeg. Een zeer donkere creoolse jongen met blikkerende bril rende achter ze aan maar moest de achtervolging staken. Hijgend, lachend en vriendelijk scheldend bleef hij staan, de middelvinger van zijn rechterhand opgestoken. 'Fuck you Appi!' Uit het gekrioel in de bakkerswinkel maakten zich twee meisjes met hoofddoekjes los die innig gearmd […] op weg gingen.

28 "[I]ngebed". Maaike Meijer, *In tekst gevat* (1996): 66-67.

> O god, the monkey rock, he thought when he turned the corner of his street. The monkey rock of adolescence […]. A Javanese girl, sharply cut face, snuggled her cheek against the shoulder of a red haired, intensely freckled boy who moved his head up and down to the crackling and sizzling coming from his Walkman. Two Moroccan boys in shiny tracksuits passed on a scooter out of which pounding music was blaring away. A very dark, Creole boy with flashing glasses ran after them but had to give up his pursuit. Panting, laughing and cursing friendly he halted, the middle finger of his right hand raised. 'Fuck you Appi!' Two girls with headscarves appeared from the swarming at the bakery and set off, arm in arm, intimately close to each other […].[29]

The "monkey rock of adolescence" is a monkey rock of ethnic variety as well. In its swarming, Anker's main characters, these white, middle-aged men, can barely maintain themselves.

In *A Sort of England*, very large parts of the novel are made up of this kind of description of big city chaos. The decadent actor David Oosterbaan gradually loses his grip on life while he is led along the seamy side of the city. First by his addicted daughter, who takes him along on her search for heroin. They pass by several drug hovels populated by Turks, Yugoslavians, Antilleans, Hindustanis and Moroccans who talk to David in poor Dutch: "You the vather? Sorry. Sorry." and "Take care of her, pa, iz ghood ghirl! Sorry!"[30] Then he encounters the moralising but corrupt Surinamese civil servant Brian Reemnet (a Virgil figure in this novel, which contains several references to Dante's *Divine Comedy*), with whom David descends deeper and deeper into an underworld of city madness. Here as well, Anker extensively described the disorienting effect of the multicultural character and overwhelming ethnic diversity of city life.[31]

The reader gets the impression that it is first and foremost the notion that these foreigners are so numerous that makes them threatening for Anker's characters. The most explicit example of this can be found in *Vrouwenzand*: the narrator of this novel, Paul Masereeuw, reacts viciously to the increasing number of foreigners in Amsterdam:

> [Er] ontlaadt zich ineens een redeloze woede in mij tegen al die verdomde Turken en Marokkanen die zo'n beetje onze stad aan het overnemen zijn. Want dat fokt maar door […]. over vijftien, twintig jaar heeft de Amsterdamse gemeenteraad een islamitische meerderheid, die de cafés weer wil ombuigen naar hun alcoholvrije oorsprong: koffiehuizen, en die gescheiden onderwijs voor jongens en meisjes afdwingt […]. Turken, Marokkanen en Surinamers hebben zich zichtbaar genesteld

29 Robert Anker, *Volledig ontstemde piano* (1994): 62-63.

30 "U de vader? Sorry. Sorry." en "Zorg ghoed voor d'r pa, iz een ghoede meisje! Sorry!" Robert Anker, *Een soort Engeland* (2001): 101-104.

31 E.g. ibidem: 149-150.

> in hun anderszijn en het is die andere aanblik die mij de stad ontfutselt waar ik bij sta en dat maakt me onrustig, het voelt vaag als een dreiging.
>
> [S]uddenly, an irrational anger is released within me towards all those damned Turks and Moroccans who are about to take over our city. Because they just breed and breed […]. Within fifteen, twenty years, the Amsterdam city council will have a Muslim majority, which will want to turn cafés back into their alcohol free originals, coffee houses, and will order separate education for boys and girls […]. Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese have nestled into their being different and it is this different spectacle that diddles me out of my city while I'm watching and this makes me uneasy. It vaguely feels like a threat.[32]

Note how Masereeuw's diatribe equates non-Dutch and Muslim, as we have seen before in this study: he fears that the increase in the number of "Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese" will result in a "Muslim majority" (though only a small minority of Surinamese are actually Muslim). That Masereeuw would hold such opinions is remarkable in the context of the novel, for this character once faced the city chaos of Amsterdam with a decidedly leftist morality. As a lawyer, he was involved in founding a "lawyers' collective" that offered help to "the victims of capitalism".[33] However, the plot of this novel is, in fact, centred on Masereeuw's moral deterioration, from his youth in the unspoiled village of Vrouwenzand to his involvement in organised crime that brought about the end of his career as a lawyer. The weak and vulnerable in society gradually change from people with whom he feels solidarity to a threatening mass.

A decisive moment in Masereeuw's downward spiral is when he betrays his leftist friends by causing the demise of the squat in which their office is located. Right after this has happened, we read:

> Het drong tot me door dat ik me al een hele tijd ergerde aan de miezerigheid, de kleinheid, maar vooral aan de lelijkheid van de buurt en zijn bewoners. De schrale, schuifelende bejaarden in hun Zeeman-kloffie, de grimas van hun opgetrokken neus en bovenlip, de dikke vrouwen met hun skai-leren boodschappenwagentjes, hun armoeiig permanentje […]; hun patatkleurige te dikke kinderen jengelend aan de hand; de werkeloze besnorde Turken in hun bruin-gestreepte Turkenpakken; al die grote honden; al die stront op straat, kapotte vuilniszakken, halve fietsen.
>
> It suddenly occurred to me that the gloominess, the smallness, but most of all the ugliness of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants had been irritating me for a long time. The meagre, shuffling elderly in their prize-fighter clothes, the grimace of their pulled-up noses and upper lips, the fat women with their imitation leather shopping carts, their shabby perms […]; their chips-coloured obese children whining by the

32 Robert Anker, *Vrouwenzand* (1998): 223-225.

33 "[A]dvocatencollectief"; "hulp aan de slachtoffers van het kapitalism". Ibidem: 296.

> hand; the unemployed, moustached Turks in their brown-striped Turkish suits; all those big dogs, all that shit on the street, broken garbage bags, bicycles in half.[34]

The character seems half aware that he is exaggerating here and in the passage cited above, but it is significant that he has this outburst right after he has sealed his descent into moral sleaziness. His disgust towards the city is disgust towards what the city has turned him into. What matters here is the way Anker constructs this disgust of the Other, which is first and foremost a fear: "in the end, this disgust personified the fear to be taken down, to be obstructed in my upwards flight through life by lousy poverty […]. I had to leave that place!"[35] Masereeuw's hatred for the "being different" of "Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese" seems to mainly stem from the fact that he, the boy from the village who tried so hard to find his place in the city, does not want to be "different". Furthermore, the double role of Islam that I mentioned before can be recognised in the passages cited above: as unemployed inhabitants of an Amsterdam working class area, the Turks are, just like the "fat women" and the "elderly", threatening because of their powerlessness; as members of a religion, it is rather the potential power they represent that "feels as a threat".

4.1.2. Embedded othering

As we can see in the passages cited in the last subsection, Anker interwove his characters' words and thoughts with old and contemporary discourses on the Other (e.g. a colonialist way of speaking about 'natives' and voices in the public debate about the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands). In this way, Anker indeed summons reality, as he claims to do in interviews, but he comments on it as well by ascribing those discourses to rather unsympathetic characters and narrators.

First, the colonialist discourse can clearly be recognised when we read remarks like "they just breed and breed" or when Turks and dogs are named in one breath. This is a form of *othering* that has often been discussed in postcolonial criticism, where the non-Western other is made 'inhuman'.[36] For Anker's characters, this increases the sense of threat: Anker has them experiencing the city as "swarming" with masses of animal-like creatures. However, an animal nature suggests vitality as well. This is an important notion, for the main charac-

34 Ibidem: 74-75.

35 "[U]iteindelijk was die afkeer het smoel van de angst om neergehaald te worden, om in mijn opvlucht door het leven belemmerd te worden door luizige armoe […]. Ik moest daar weg!" Ibidem: 75.

36 Cf. Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia* (1983): 184; Maaike Meijer, In tekst gevat (1996): 153-155.

ters of these texts are decadent men, most of them going through a midlife crisis. They observe that they are on their way to becoming obsolete, are discontent with how their lives are unfolding and are convinced that they have to be 'saved' by a younger woman, while at the same time fearing that they can no longer claim one because they have grown too old. The big city and the Muslims that are part of it feel threatening because they radiate the youth and vitality that these men have lost.

This link between a generation gap and the fear that a vital non-Western Other, often Muslims, will replace the decadent Dutch in their own country, can be found in several places in Anker's work apart from his novels. Take for instance the cycle of poems called "Senex and Safinur" ("Senex en Safinur") from *Pants Flapped Man*, where Masereeuw's fear that he, as a white man, will be at the mercy of Muslims at some point in the future has become reality in the relationship between an elderly Dutch man, Senex, and his Turkish nurse, Safinur. In this cycle, Senex's obsoleteness is constantly contrasted with Safinur's vitality. She scolds him for being a dirty old man when he impotently leers at her, tells him that he must know his place and is quick in everything she does, even praying; in contrast, Senex needs an entire morning just to think one thought.[37] He deals with the same issue in his absurdist play *Is This England?* when four young hooligans, two of them Moroccan, trash the house of a washed-out Dutch couple in true *A Clockwork Orange*-style. Afterward, they sit down together to discuss the dreams that the couple had in their youth and how they never came true as they grew older.[38]

This notion of a threatening Other is also summoned when Anker refers to the public debate. For the contemporary Dutch reader of his work, Masereeuw's fear that 'the Muslims' will take over society, does not just belong to the "autonomous world of the book". When *Vrouwenzand* was published, similar points of view were regularly put forward in the public debate. For instance, a 1993 oped published in *Het Algemeen Dagblad*, one of the Dutch national daily newspapers, claimed that "at forums, debates and television broadcasts [of minority broadcast organisations], it [can] be heard how [*allochtones*] will be a majority in many cities and will then be in charge".[39] According to the author of this oped, "[m]any Dutch have, however, difficulties with the idea that, because of demographic processes, there will be a time when a Muslim mayor will be at the

37 Robert Anker, *De broekbewapperde mens* (2002): 41-50.

38 Robert Anker, *Is dit Engeland?* (2003): I:6,7.

39 "Op fora, discussieavonden en televisieuitzendingen valt te vernemen dat zij over een generatie de meerderheid vormen in menige gemeente en het daar dan voor het zeggen hebben." Piet Niekerk, "Allochtonen hebben hypergevoelige antenne voor discriminatie" (1993).

head of their hometowns".[40] Two years later, this was stated even more sharply in an op-ed in another daily newspaper, *Het Parool*:

> Since almost sixty per cent of the Amsterdammers below twenty belong to an ethnic minority already (Het Parool, October 13), one does not have to be a demographer to conclude that within a few decades […] the vast majority will be *allochtonous*. This will be the case as well for the other big cities and, in time, for the entire country.
>
> Population growth is an exponential process, which means that it happens increasingly fast. The upsetting consequence of this is that there will be a moment in the next century when the Muslims will be a majority in this country, with all the horrible consequences: minorities will then really be oppressed, political parties will no longer exist and we will be (physically!) introduced to Muslim law.[41]

It is important to realise here that, despite their flawed arguments, these op-eds did not merely represent some extreme opinions on the fringe of the public debate during the 1990s. These were authors who had access to the opinion pages of large national newspapers and were taken seriously in the discussions that were going on. Thus, when Anker has Masereeuw go on a diatribe that is almost an *ad verbum* repetition of the op-ed cited above, including the mistaken inference that "*allochtonous*" and belonging "to an ethnic minority" equals being Muslim, his readers were likely to recognise a certain kind of voice in the contemporary public debate. Because this voice was ascribed to an immoral and decadent lawyer, a man in crisis who was sexually involved with his brother's young daughter, one could read *Vrouwenzand* as seriously questioning its reliability. After all, within the novel this way of thinking seems to function as even more proof that Masereeuw has completely lost his moral compass.

Such an 'embedding' of fear of a Muslim takeover can also be found in *A Sort of England*. In this novel, we find a fictional play, called "Theatre Destruc-

40 "Veel Nederlanders hebben echter moeite met de gedachte, dat door de demografische ontwikkeling, te zijner tijd een Islamitische [sic] burgemeester aan het hoofd van hun woonplaats zal staan." Ibidem. The example was not well chosen since mayors are not democratically elected in the Netherlands, but appointed by the national government.

41 "Als nu al bijna zestig procent van de Amsterdammers onder de twintig jaar tot een etnische minderheid behoort (Het Parool van 13 oktober), hoef je geen demograaf te zijn om vast te stellen dat binnen enkele decennia […] de overgrote meerderheid allochtoon zal zijn. Dit zal snel ook gelden voor de andere grote steden en op de langere duur voor het hele land. Bevolkingsgroei werkt exponentieel, dat wil zeggen dat hij steeds sneller gaat. De benauwde consequentie hiervan is dat er in de volgende eeuw een moment zal komen dat de islamieten de meerderheid vormen in dit land, met alle vreselijke gevolgen van dien: minderheden zullen dan echt worden onderdrukt, politieke partijen zullen niet meer kunnen bestaan, wij zullen (aan den lijve!) kennismaken met het islamitisch recht." Harm Mulder, "Groei van de islam vormt bedreiging voor Nederland" (1995).

tion: or 360 years late", translated by Gerrit Komrij.[42] The novel's main character, David Oosterbaan, stars in this play and within the novel it functions as a *mise en abyme* in which Oosterbaan's decadence and immoral conduct are reflected. The play is described at the beginning of the novel and can be read as an introduction to the rest of the story. David's daughter, who he left with her mother at birth and who has led a homeless life, returns to her father to hold him accountable for his mistakes, just like the daughter in the fictional play.

In this fictional play we find the themes that could also be found in Anker's other texts: Muslims are represented as animal and vital, a threat to a white man who is clearly beyond his physical and moral prime, and population growth will ultimately enable a Muslim regime to seize power in the West. In this fictional play, written in "metaphors of blood, cadavers torn open, the rotting body which continues to live despite the fact that even the maggots have left it",[43] these notions become grotesque. This ominous monstrosity of a theatre play is summarised as follows:

> Iedereen aan de drank, de pillen en de drugs – dat ziet [de Oostenrijkse toneelschrijver] Schwaigl in zijn laatste stuk […] als het eindstadium van de verloederde westerse cultuur, waarna de gedrogeerde bevolking definitief onder de voet gelopen door fanatieke (en cleane!) moslims […]. Die uitgeholde westerse cultuur krijgt in het stuk […] gestalte in De Onbekende Acteur (David Oosterbaan) […]. Ontredderd dwaalt De Onbekende Acteur door het Theater van de verloederde westerse cultuur.
>
> Everybody is an alcoholic, is using pills and drugs – this is how [Austrian playwright] Schwaigl sees the final stage of degenerated Western culture […], after which the drugged population is definitively trampled underfoot by fanatic (and clean!) Muslims […]. In the play […] this eroded Western culture takes shape in The Unknown Actor (David Oosterbaan) […]. Desperately, The Unknown Actor wanders through the theatre of degenerate Western culture. [44]

Anker peppered his summary of this play with all kinds of populist, Islamophobic drivel, exaggerated *ad absurdum*. In Austria, "Muslims" are about to win the elections, "three hundred and sixty years […] after the siege of Vienna by the Turks in 1683".[45] This is reminiscent of Masereeuw's fear that one day Muslims will manage to take over Amsterdam – a fear that, as we have seen, was regularly expressed in the public debate throughout the 1990s. And again, this fear was ridiculed because it was ascribed to an unsympathetic character, this time

42 Robert Anker, *Een soort Engeland* (2001): 18.
43 Ibidem: 18.
44 Ibidem.
45 "[D]riehonderd en zestig jaar […] na de belegering door de Turken in 1683." Ibidem.

"Wonderboy […] a handsome charming fascist, neo-Nazi, whatever".[46] Wonderboy's election campaign is decidedly paranoid: "[He] accuses the Muslim of cloning children in secret hideouts in the countryside, with the aid of Arabic oil money, because even they cannot have bred such a high number".[47] This character, the leader of a populist party, is a clear reference to Jörg Haider, who caused an international uproar when he managed to enter the Austrian government with his extreme right-wing FPÖ party just before *A Sort of England* was published.

Not only did Anker titillate his readers by adapting international scandals and ideas from the public debate into the fictional play in his novel, but the absurdist, even grotesque tone of the summary of this play and Wonderboy's hysteria clearly suppose an *authorial audience* that laughs at such ideas. With the name of the translator of this fictional play, the summary can even be read as a direct polemics. Gerrit Komrij was a famous Dutch poet, formerly poet laureate of the Netherlands, who warned against the danger of Islam throughout the years, often causing considerable controversy while doing so. One of the most notable examples was an infamous 1983 column, "La ilaha illa Allah", in which Komrij claimed that with Khomeini's takeover of Iran:

> the Holy War has commenced. This time, the Turks won't stop in front of Vienna. The Western world will fall into the lap of Mohammedanism like a ripe fruit […]. Europe is ripe for Islam. They have given up any resistance from the outset, because of the supremacy of oil. […] One morning we will all wake up with Ali as our name.[48]

This well-known text by Komrij, including the decisive role that oil will play in the Muslim conquest of Europe, is in fact the scenario for the fictional play in *A Sort of England*. That play functions within the novel as an absurd and exaggerated representation of the moral demise of the main character, which can be read as a stab at Komrij by Anker.

Earlier I discussed how *Good Manners* presented Islam as an alternative (albeit an unacceptable one) to a secularised Western society that has lost its sense of solidarity. We see the same contradiction in this fictional play, this time distorted in an absurdist and grotesque manner: the "drugged population" of a "de-

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46 "Wonderboy is een knappe charmante fascist, neonazi, whatever." Ibidem: 241.

47 "Wonderboy beschuldigt de moslims ervan dat ze op geheime plaatsen op het platteland met behulp van Arabisch oliegeld kinderen klonen, want zoveel kunnen zelfs zij niet bij elkaar gefokt hebben." Ibidem.

48 "[D]e heilige oorlog is begonnen. De Turken zullen ditmaal niet voor Wenen blijven staan. De westerse wereld zal als een rijpe vrucht in de schoot van het mohammedanisme vallen […]. Europa is rijp voor de islam. Ze hebben er, door de overmacht van de olie, elk verzet al bij voorbaat opgegeven. […] Op een ochtend zullen we wakker worden en allemaal Ali heten." Gerrit Komrij, *Dit helse moeras* (1983): 15-18.

generated Western culture" is contrasted with the "clean" Muslims who will ultimately be victorious. This contradiction is explicitly linked to the contradiction between city and village. As Wonderboy claims, the cloning of Muslims takes place in the countryside. At the end of the play, when the Muslims have seized power and their leader has engaged himself to the daughter of David's character, we read: "David's beautiful, young, clean, juice-drinking daughter, ex-model, turns up to hold him accountable. Cengiz Köyluoglu, the Muslim fiancé, accompanies her, giggling and still shy when faced with the rotting patriarch."[49] The name of the Turkish Muslim leader is explained: "Cengiz (Genghis!) Köyluoglu (Village Boy!)".[50] Here, Islam is represented as a militant version of the village and its morals, a notion that recurred in Anker's next novel, *Hajar and Daan*. Ultimately, they are victorious over the decadence and deterioration of the city.

The end of the fictional play reflects the end of the novel, where we find the kind of homecoming in the countryside that is so typical of Anker's work. David has had a nervous breakdown and returns in his mind to the village of his youth. It is clearly suggested that in doing so, he also returns to a moment of authenticity, a moment before he became corrupted through his life as an actor in the big city. This is communicated in the play when a bunch of provincials finish the corruption and deterioration of the character that David plays.

Thus, in Anker's work, on one hand Muslims and Islam can be seen to represent the city itself as an inherent part of chaotic and fragmentising city life. On the other hand, they function as the antithesis of modern Western city life. In a world without certainties, they offer certainty. In both cases Anker's characters perceive them to be threatening and he constructs his stories in such a way that this perception is embedded. After all, it is focalised by morally bankrupt characters. For the white, middle-aged men in Anker's stories, the Muslim becomes a significant Other: the 'urban other' for the village boys they have remained despite themselves and the 'provincial other' for the men of the city that they want to be.

4.2. *Hajar and Daan*

Just like *Vrouwenzand* and *A Sort of England*, *Hajar and Daan* tells the story of a man searching for himself (or rather, *his* self) and for authenticity. This clichéd theme is presented both seriously and ironically in Anker's third novel. At a cer-

49 "Davids mooie, jonge, heldere, jusdrinkende dochter, ex-fotomodel, verschijnt om hem om rekenschap te vragen. Cengiz Köyluoglu, de moslimverloofde, staat er giechelend bij, toch nog verlegen in het aangezicht van de rottende patriarch." Robert Anker, *Een soort Engeland* (2001): 248.

50 "Cengiz (Djenghis!) Köyluoglu (Dorpsjongen!)" Ibidem.

tain moment, the main character of the story, Daan, shows his beloved Hajar the film *West Side Story*, of which he says: "it's a very sentimental story, of course. It's almost camp and yet very pure."[51] This can be read as a reading instruction for and within the text. The reader is supposed to assume an ironic attitude and distance towards the authenticity that Daan ultimately finds and the over-dramatic manner and stereotypes with which the clichéd story of 'impossible love' is told. At the same time, the novel is meant to be a "pure" narrative about 'real' people and their emotions.

Just like Anker's earlier novels, *Hajar and Daan* is the story of a man's demise, although Daan is much younger than the main characters in most of Anker's other stories and he is not trapped in the same kind of downward spiral of moral corruption. Rather, he experiences positive moral growth after he starts an affair with his pupil, Hajar Nait Sibaha. The difference between them is not only cultural: in the novel, Daan is presented as an empty pleasure-seeker while Hajar is a serious, intelligent and ambitious girl. After a relationship of about a year, she breaks off all contact. This drives Daan to distraction but also stimulates him to educate himself. Hajar marries a Moroccan in the meantime, but decides to file for divorce after meeting Daan again. To prevent this from happening, her grandparents in Morocco kidnap her. Hajar manages to escape and moves in with Daan. After this, the novel seemingly moves towards a happy end. However, Hajar is kidnapped once again – it remains unclear by whom – and Daan is beaten up by her younger brother, the criminal Khalid. The novel ends with Daan having sold all his possessions in the Netherlands and spending his days on a market in the medina of Fes, Morocco. There, he waits for the moment that Hajar will turn up. Meanwhile, Hajar is locked away in an unknown location and writes long letters to Daan's old address that will never reach him.

Hajar and Daan is in many respects an exuberant novel. Anker uses and blends many different kinds of language, varying from expressly literary to vulgar colloquial, from elevated to banal. In fact, everything in this novel is *much*: many drugs, much sex, many reflections on education and society. The author clearly aims to overwhelm his readers with this 'muchness' and the tone is set, in this respect, with the first sentence: "When Daan Hollander, history teacher at DataCare College in Amsterdam, fucked high school student Hajar for the first time, she kept her headscarf on – as he requested."[52] This sentence was repeatedly cited by critics and what was undoubtedly one of its aims – to draw attention

51 "[H]et is een supersentimenteel verhaal natuurlijk. Het is bijna camp en toch heel zuiver." Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 126.

52 "Toen Daan Hollander, leraar geschiedenis aan het DataCare College in Amsterdam, Hajar Nait Sibaha, uit vijf vwo, voor de eerste keer neukte, hield zij haar hoofddoek om – op zijn verzoek." Ibidem: 11.

– was thus fulfilled. That is not to say that all of them were pleased: one critic remarked that phrased like this, this sentence sounded like "someone is 'fucking' someone else as if he is annexing a piece of land", concluding that she found this "revolting".[53] Thus, at the very beginning of Anker's novel, we find the same stereotype as in some novels by Abdolah, Benali and Bouazza: the passive, feminine East, ready to be, as Said phrases it in *Orientalism*, "ravished by the [potent, virile] West".[54] However, as we will see, exotic stereotypes are treated as much with irony as they are perpetuated in this novel.

What this sentence first and foremost makes clear is that the narrative that is about to begin will be juicy. Although the sentence itself suggests that this is because of three reasons (Daan is Hajar's teacher, Hajar is young and she is a Muslim) the rest of the novel shows that it is mainly Hajar's headscarf that makes this affair rather risqué. Because of this *signalling word* (in the Netherlands, the headscarf often functions as an outstanding *pars pro toto* for Islam in discussions about integration and the problematic relations between 'the West' and 'the Muslim world'), the sex between two people becomes, just like in Bouazza's short story "Apollien", an encounter between representatives of two communities. An encounter that is, with this 'shocking' first sentence, immediately thrown into relief.

In Section 4.2.1, I will discuss how Anker extensively cites the public debate about the presence of Muslims in Dutch society that was held in the slipstream of 9/11. By appropriating well-known voices from this debate and using *signalling words*, the meeting between 'Dutch' and 'Muslim' is rife with tension and friction. By recontextualising voices and words from the public debate in the fictional world of the novel, it is made clear to the reader "that something is at stake".

This is also done by Anker's construction of *Hajar and Daan*, which he referred to as a "contemporary Romeo and Juliet […] set against the background of the turmoil of secondary education and multicultural society".[55] This is stressed several times within the text: the novel contains a number of references to Shakespeare's play and one of the most famous modern adaptations of the classic story, the American musical *West Side Story*. This places the relationships between Muslims and the Dutch in the context of a family feud and warring gangs (and even represents them this way). However, as I will discuss in Section 4.2.2., an important element of Shakespeare's story is missing from

53 "[D]at iemand een ander "neukt" alsof hij een stuk land aan het annexeren is, vind ik […] stuitend." Marja Pruis, "Het n-woord" (2004).

54 Cf. the preceding chapters, pp. 66-67, 113, 148.

55 Robert Anker, "Een romanschrijver is geen chroniqueur – over de tijdsgeest in het Nederlandse proza" (2005).

Hajar and Daan: the hatred is not mutual in Anker's novel. Only in the eyes of Muslims does there seem to be a feud going on. In that sense, *Hajar and Daan* has much more in common with another old story about impossible love, albeit one which is not explicitly referenced in the text: the medieval Dutch play *Gloriant*.[56] In both this play, about the love between a German duke and an Oriental princess, and *Hajar and Daan* it is only the girl's Muslim family who is against the relationship between the lovers. Another important similarity between these two texts on each end of Dutch literary history is the positive influence that his Muslim lover has on the main character: in a similar way as the duke in *Gloriant*, Daan loses his loutishness and boorishness by falling in love with a Muslim girl.

The one-sided nature of the conflict between the West and the Muslim world that is stressed by the intertextuality with *Romeo and Juliet* can also be found in the polyphony of the novel praised so much by its critics. Taking into account the large number of discourses and voices that Anker cites in *Hajar and Daan*, it is remarkable that there are very few speaking Muslims in this novel. Because of this, Islam and Muslims remain a kind of uniform threat: the Other, filled with hatred and the main obstacle for the lovers. In Section 4.2.3, I will analyse how this can be linked with the narrative perspective of the novel, which is decidedly Western and not without prejudices. Partially, this seems to be a conscious decision on the part of the author, who again dramatises the voices and perspectives that he puts forward in the novel. However, in contrast to Anker's earlier work, it remains unclear whether the fear of the Muslim threat is embedded in the text or not.

4.2.1. The public debate in the novel, the novel in the public debate

Though the author may deny that he is a "chronicler of his times", his novel very explicitly registered different, easily recognisable discourses from contemporary public debates about the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands. In the description of a class given by Daan at the beginning of the novel, for instance, two *signalling words* – "Enlightenment" and "backwards" – appear:

56 This is one of the famous four Dutch medieval plays found in the 'Hulthem Manuscript', known as the Abele Spelen (often translated as the Beautiful Plays). It is alternatively called *Gloriant van Bruuyswijc* or *Gloriant ende Florentijn*. All these are modern titles for a text that was originally called *A Beautiful Play and a Noble Thing of the Duke of Bruuyswijc How he Became the Lover of the Daughter of the Rouge Lion of Abelant and Followed by a Farce* (*Een abel spel ende een edel dic vanden hertoge van bruuyswijc hoe hi wert minnende des roede lioens dochter van abelant Ende ene sotternie na volgende*).

> ‘Dit, beste mensen, is het Grote Verhaal van de Verlichting in het Westen. De islamitische wereld, om eens iets te noemen, heeft die Verlichting niet gekend. In de praktijk zijn Kerk en staat eigenlijk alleen, en nog steeds met grote moeite, gescheiden in Turkije, na de grote grondwetsherziening van Atatürk in 1924 – gejuich van een paar Turkse jongens […]. De meeste andere islamitische landen hebben’ – Daan heeft er in navolging van zijn collega Frank iets op gevonden om het woord ‘achterlijk’ te vermijden, dat op het puntje van zijn tong loert om de mensen te kwetsen – ‘de moderniteit nog niet weten te bereiken. Nee, ook Marokko niet.’ Licht gejoel bij de Marokkaanse factie.
>
> ‘This, dear people, is the Grand Narrative of Enlightenment in the West. The Muslim world, to name just an example, didn’t go through this Enlightenment. In fact, only in Turkey have church and state been separated, and still not without pains, after Atatürk’s 1924 great constitutional revision – a couple of Turkish boys cheer […]. Most of the other Muslim countries have not yet’ – following Frank, his colleague, Daan has solved how to avoid the word ‘backwards’, which is lurking on the tip of his tongue, ready to offend people – ‘reached modernity. No, not even Morocco.’ The Moroccan faction whoops a bit.[57]

What Daan is saying here amounts to an often heard – and, at the time, rather flogged to death – opinion about the difference between the West and the Muslim world. An example of this opinion expressed in the public debate can be found in an op-ed by one of the first politicians who began targeting Islam in the Netherlands, conservative liberal Frits Bolkestein:

> Separation of church and state, freedom of expression, tolerance and non-discrimination are principles that might be of European origin, but for which liberalism claims a universal validity. They are the product of the Enlightenment. As I have expounded elsewhere, Islam has a poor record of service in regard to these matters.[58]

Anker has Daan express the exact same opinion, albeit rather simplified (which serves to characterise Daan as a bit of a simpleton): the Enlightenment is something “*we* can be proud of, for it has brought us as far as *we* have gotten, for it will never lose its validity. The Western culture is the global culture of the fu-

57 Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 29.

58 “Scheiding van kerk en staat, vrijheid van meningsuiting, verdraagzaamheid en non-discriminatie zijn beginselen die weliswaar producten van de Europese geschiedenis zijn, maar waarvoor het liberalisme universele geldigheid en waarde claimt. Zij zijn voortgekomen uit de Verlichting. Elders heb ik uiteengezet dat de Islam op deze punten een povere staat van dienst heeft.” Frits Bolkestein, “Niet marchanderen met de Verlichting” (2000). For more information about Frits Bolkestein and his role in the public debate, see the introduction to this study (note 23).

ture and this is the culture of the Enlightenment."[59] There is a certain tension in the way Daan phrases his lesson here, because the novel as a whole seriously questions whether his audience of "cheering" Turks and "whooping" Moroccans count themselves among the "we" he is talking about. In Section 4.2.3, I will more extensively discuss the ambiguous use of the first person plural, not only by Daan but by the narrator as well. Here, it clarifies that this kind of thinking amounts to little more than Western propaganda almost exclusively meant for and accepted by Westerners, paradoxically enough, considering the claims to universal validity.

It is worth mentioning that the influence of the public debate on the novel was not in just one direction; Daan's fictional class itself contributed to the public debate. A prominent voice in that debate, conservative liberal Gerry van der List, referred to it in a 2004 op-ed about the Enlightenment as a "crucial episode in European history". In his op-ed, Van der List approvingly cited "the teacher at the Amsterdam school in Robert Anker's *Hajar and Daan*", seemingly ignoring the fact that the novel presents Daan's opinions rather ironically. Instead, Van der List added that it is "foolish – and demagogic – to draw a straight line from Felix Meritis to Auschwitz and the Gulag Archipelago".[60]

Van der List linked Daan's "cultural history for beginners", as he called it, with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a well-known critic of Islam who at the time was a member of parliament for the conservative liberal party. According to Van der List, Daan's claim that "Muslim countries have not yet […] reached modernity" is proven by Hirsi Ali when she writes that:

> Islam has not gone through a process of Enlightenment and Muslim societies struggle with the same problems as Christianity did before the Enlightenment process. To become acquainted with reason would liberate the mind of the individual Muslim from the yoke of the afterlife, the continuous feelings of guilt and the seductions of fundamentalism.[61]

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59 "Een verhaal om trots op te zijn omdat het ons zo ver heeft gebracht als we zijn, omdat het zijn geldigheid nooit zal verliezen. De westerse cultuur is de cultuur van de toekomst en dat is de cultuur van de Verlichting." Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 26.

60 "[D]e leraar op de Amsterdamse school in Robert Ankers Hajar en Daan"; "Het is dwaas – en demagogisch – om een rechte lijn van Felix Meritis naar Auschwitz en de Goelag Archipel te trekken." Gerry van der List, "Superieure beschaving" (2004).

61 "[D]e islam [is] nog niet door een proces van Verlichting gegaan en islamitische samenlevingen worstelen nog met dezelfde problemen als het christendom voor het Verlichtingsproces. Kennismaking met de rede zou de geest van de individuele moslim bevrijden van het juk van het hiernamaals, de voortdurende schuldgevoelens en de verleiding van het fundamentalisme." Cited by Gerry van der List, "Superieure beschaving" (2004).

This link between Daan's class and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's ideas was not just a random interpretation by Van der List; Hirsi Ali was one of the voices from the public debate who was referred to in Anker's novel. When, for instance, Hajar tells Daan that she has become estranged from her religion, she mentions the exact same issues as Hirsi Ali did in the op-ed cited above:

> Het leek me een beetje onzin – dat eeuwige leven bedoel ik […]. En die paar lessen van jou over de Verlichting zetten me ook aan het denken. Je zei een keer dat je het vreemd vond dat een god – Jezus bedoelde je – kon sterven […]. Het leek me op slag volslagen onzin, dat Jezus-verhaal en ja, dat begon ook een beetje aan mijn Allah te knabbelen. Verder kreeg ik grote moeite met het idee dat we altijd maar schuldig zouden zijn […]. Die met het zwaard in de ene hand en de koran in de andere de waarheid willen afdwingen, dat zijn de grootste criminelen. Mensen als Bin Laden, de ayatollahs, de mullahs, sommige imams.
>
> It seemed a bit ridiculous – eternal life, I mean […]. And those few classes of yours about Enlightenment made me think as well. You once said you found it strange that a god – you meant Jesus – could die […]. Immediately, it seemed completely ridiculous to me, that Jesus story and yeah, that started to eat away at my Allah. Moreover, I was very much bothered by the idea that we're always guilty […]. Those who want to establish truth with the sword in the one hand and the Koran in the other are the biggest criminals. People like Bin Laden, the ayatollahs, the mullahs, some imams.[62]

This passage reads like an illustration of Hirsi Ali's ideas. What Hirsi Ali called becoming "acquainted with reason" had indeed freed Hajar's mind of the "yoke of the afterlife, the continuous feelings of guilt and the seductions of fundamentalism" – Anker has Hajar neatly mention each one of these ideas. Elsewhere in the novel, it is equally easy to link Hajar to Hirsi Ali. Anker has his character become a member of the Dutch labour party, just as Hirsi Ali originally was. And like Hirsi Ali, Hajar clashes with this party because of her opinions about Islam and Muslims. These strongly resemble those of the famous politician, such as her appeal to Muslims to "look a bit more often at themselves in the tormenting, displeasing mirror of the despised West".[63]

Anker continuously summons the public debate in *Hajar and Daan*. His characters' statements echo famous critics of Islam. Several remarks by a Dutch

62 Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 252.

63 Ibidem: 259. For those who still did not get it, Anker wrote a Christmas story for a national newspaper a few months after *Hajar and Daan* was published. In this story, Hajar has become a well-known politician who is threatened and has to surround herself with bodyguards. Robert Anker, "De kerstboom" (2004). And again, a year later, he explicitly wrote that he wanted to suggest that Hajar was "a Hirsi Ali of the future" ("een Hirsi Ali van de toekomst"). Robert Anker, "Een romanschrijver is geen chroniqueur – over de tijdgeest in het Nederlandse proza" (2005).

teacher, Phreek Hemel, are literally taken from an infamous interview with Pim Fortuyn during the 2002 elections – an interview that led to Fortuyn's original party firing him as their leader and the foundation of his own party with which he almost won the elections (although he did not live to see election day, having been murdered a few days before). "Should I respect a backwards culture […]?" Phreek Hemel shouts during a staff meeting. He goes on a diatribe in which he claims that for Muslims, "women [are] second-hand creatures" and they see "gays as lowlier than pigs or dogs".[64] The teacher recounts how he, a gay man himself, "walked in the schoolyard and had to wade through hissing sounds and pig's grunting".[65] Furthermore, he criticises the tendency among Muslims to "always lie and [to] deny straightaway".[66] Most Dutch readers would have easily recognised Pim Fortuyn's words in these lines by Anker's character. Two years earlier, Fortuyn had said that Muslim women "are given but one room of their own, the kitchen",[67] that he himself, as a Roman Catholic and a gay man, was "not only a Christian dog, but less than a pig as well" in the eyes of Muslims, and that "many homosexual secondary school teachers […] do not dare to come out with their identity in the classrooms because of Turkish and Moroccan boys".[68] Fortuyn also compared Muslims to Calvinists because they "always lie".[69]

Anker had Phreek make these remarks during a tumultuous discussion about a proposal by parents to provide Muslims with a room for their prayers. The description of this discussion reads like a summary of the criticism of Islam, or even Islamophobia, that thrived in the Netherlands during the years following 9/11. Another teacher suggests the school should "ban all headscarves […] just like SS uniforms and the Hitler salute in '39"[70] – a comparison that was made more often at the time. For instance, in a 2001 op-ed in the national newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, it was claimed that if a "clerk of a Dutch court" wore a head-

64 "Moet ik respect hebben voor een achterlijke cultuur […] waarin vrouwen tot tweedehands wezens worden gemaakt […], homo's als lager varkens of honden worden beschouwd." Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 141.

65 "Dat ik over het schoolplein liep en door de sissende geluiden en het varkensgeknor heen moest waden." Ibidem:148.

66"[A]ltijd maar onmiddellijk liegen en ontkennen". Ibidem: 147.

67 "[Die] maar een recht hebben, het aanrecht". Cited in Frank Poorthuis & Hans Wansink, "'De islam is een achterlijke cultuur'" (2002).

68 "Ik ben niet alleen een christenhond, maar ook nog minder dan een varken"; "Op middelbare scholen zijn er tal van homoseksuele leraren die vanwege Turkse en Marokkaanse jongens in de klas niet durven uitkomen voor hun identiteit." Ibidem.

69 "[D]ie liegen altijd". Ibidem.

70 "[I]k [zou] er opnieuw voor willen pleiten alle hoofddoekjes te verbieden […] net als in '39 de Hitlergroet en ss-uniformen." Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 140.

scarf, it would be the same kind of "outrage" as if she were to pin on "a swastika".[71] As in earlier works by Anker, characters fear that Muslims will seize power through gaining a demographic majority: "And see, there is the advance guard. Guest workers, asylum seekers. Fifty per cent of the children being born in Amsterdam are foreign. They're coming to get it!"[72] At the end of the meeting, the narrator comments on what has just been narrated: "It can no longer be kept inside, so much bottled-up frustration, so much political incorrectness that apparently has to be vented."[73] In this remark, we can recognise the tendency seen in other works by Anker: the Islamophobia expressed by the characters is being explained as "frustration". However, as I will discuss over the next few sub-sections, unlike Anker's earlier work, there is quite some ambiguity in this novel about how justified this frustration is.

In several interviews, Anker explained that he does a lot of research while writing a novel and sometimes even copies entire passages from non-literary texts to summon reality as well as possible.[74] However, in the preceding lines I have not tried to show where Anker did his research for his novel or which opeds were laying on his desk when he wrote his characters' remarks. What I wanted to show is the ways in which these voices from the public debate function in his novel and how they summon the public debate while also recontextualising it.

Many of Anker's characters are remarkably stereotyped: Phreek Hemel, the gay teacher, talks affectedly, has his house stuffed with Roman Catholic paraphernalia and continuously quotes well-known gay authors such as famous Dutch author Gerard van het Reve; the teacher who cries "They're coming to get it!" is a leftist activist who has put posters of Che Guevara, Lenin, Mao and Fidel Castro on the walls of his classroom and smokes hand-rolled cigarettes; and elsewhere in the novel we find a *nouveau riche* show-off as well as a swinging black man – to name but a few examples. The Zeitgeist that Anker creates may be recognisable, but it is also very clichéd – something which the author brings about with clear relish. Or, rather, it is recognisable and, arguably, funny *because* it is so clichéd.

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71 "[A]ffront"; "griffier van de Nederlandse rechtbank"; "een hakenkruis". F.A. Muller, "Alle hoofddoekjes de wereld uit!" (2001).

72 "En kijk, daar heb je de voorhoede al. Gastarbeiders, asielzoekers. Vijftig procent van de kinderen die in Amsterdam geboren worden is al allochtoon. Ze komen het halen!" Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 145.

73 "[E]r is geen houden meer aan, zoveel opgekropte frustratie, zoveel politieke incorrectheid als er blijkbaar uit moet." Ibidem: 150.

74 Cf. Maarten Moll, "Robert Anker is een goede schrijver" (2002) and Erik de Bruin, "Iedere schrijver wil iets nieuws maken" (2005).

This also explains the anachronistic nature of many of the remarks made in the novel. The staff meeting takes place in 1999. At that time, the term "backwards culture" did not have the signalling function it had at the time the novel was published; Fortuyn gave his infamous interview, in which this term was popularised, in 2001. Thus, Anker's main aim does not seem to be a truly realistic representation of a staff meeting in 1999, but rather to sketch a situation in which his readers can recognise reality as they know it. In this respect we can understand why he has Hajar talking about "Bin Laden, the ayatollahs, the mullahs". In the chronology of the novel, Hajar says this before 9/11, when Bin Laden was hardly as well-known as he became afterwards. It is strange as well that a Moroccan, Sunni girl would identify strict Islam with "ayatollahs" (shi'a clerics) and "mullahs" (a term which is mainly used in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) instead of, say, 'fqihs' and 'muftis', which are more current in Morocco.

However, Hajar's words immediately remind the contemporary Dutch reader of a familiar image of fanatical Islam: for example, Al Qa'ida, Ayatollah Khomeini and his fatwa on Salman Rushdie, or Pakistani madrassas where fundamentalist Islam is taught. This is similar to what Abdolah did when he had one of his shi'a characters join the strictly Sunni Taliban: the aim is to stress that we are dealing with fundamentalism here. By using words that bring all kinds of connotations with them and that were strongly emotionally charged around 2004, Anker made the public debate from which they were taken the scene of the love story in his novel. By citing the fiercely anti-Islamic discourse of Pim Fortuyn and others, Anker brings the sharp contrasts between the West and Islam into his text that he needs for his "contemporary Romeo and Juliet".

4.2.2. More *Gloriant* than *Romeo and Juliet*

In his summer diary, Robert Anker wrote: "education is a mirror of society, anything that happens there, happens at school".[75] This is at least true of the Data-Care College where *Hajar and Daan* is set. The discussion described in the last subsection is a good example. Similarly, the relationship between Hajar and Daan itself is a reflection of social tensions at the time: "Robert Anker has boiled down the subject that has now confused Dutch politics for several years to the doomed love between a Dutch man and a Moroccan girl", one critic wrote in his review of *Hajar and Daan.* Anker's publisher decided to put this very line on the cover of the novel from the third edition onwards.[76]

75 "[H]et onderwijs is een spiegel van de samenleving, alles wat daar gebeurt, gebeurt op school." Robert Anker, *Innerlijke vaart* (2005): 25.

76 Frank van Dijl, "Wat kan Robert Anker schrijven!" (2004).

In the story itself, it is made clear as well that the love affair is a miniature representation of the encounter between 'Islam' and 'the West', which is exactly why it is doomed. That is what Anker wants to stress when he refers to *Romeo and Juliet*, as in the following, quite blatant, example: Hajar has just returned to Daan on what turns out to be the very day that the 9/11 attacks take place. The narrator comments, citing the thoughts and words of the characters and random media voices both in free indirect speech and direct speech:

> Balkonscène. Maar het zijn nu niet de Capulets en de Montagues die, als bij Shakespeare, de geliefden kunnen scheiden, maar oneindig veel grotere en invloedrijkere families – wereldfamilies! […] De moslimwereld, de derde wereld, wat is het verschil, heeft het hart van de westerse democratie bereikt, heeft 'het arrogante Amerika' een vuistslag toegediend en Amerika gaat terugslaan, dat is zeker, en dat wordt geen war on terrorism maar een war on islam en dat zal ook in Nederland zijn weerslag hebben.
>
> 'O Daan, Daan lieveling, dit gaat tussen ons in staan, dit gaat ons uit elkaar trekken.'Balcony scene.
>
> Balcony scene. But this time it is not, as in Shakespeare, the Capulets and the Montagues who might keep the lovers apart, but endlessly larger and more influential families – world families! […] The Muslim world, the third world, what's the difference, has reached the heart of Western democracy, has dealt 'arrogant America' a blow and America will hit back, that much is certain, and that won't be a war on terrorism but a war on Islam, and that will have its repercussions in the Netherlands as well.
>
> 'Oh, Daan, Daan darling, this will come to stand between us, this will tear us apart.'[77]

The suggestion that this reference to Shakespeare carries does not come true in the novel: the "world families" are not like the Capulets and the Montagues because the hatred between them is not mutual. All the violence in this novel comes from the Muslim side.

In this subsection I will discuss how *Hajar and Daan* is, in fact, half a *Romeo and Juliet*. As said, the novel is much more like *Gloriant*, with which it has more elements in common, such as the Muslims' one-sided hatred, the ease with which the Muslim girl 'converts' to her Western lover's worldview and the civilising effect she has on the male protagonist. One element that is wholly unique to this novel when compared to these other texts is that the character developments of Hajar and Daan have the shape of a cross: while Hajar becomes increasingly Western after becoming "acquainted with reason" (as discussed in subsection 3.2.1.), Daan moves towards Islam, which means a move towards irrationality (i.e. away from the Enlightenment and reason).

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77 Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 250.

In the novel, the encounter between the "world families" takes place on three levels. On the level of national and international societies, 'the Muslim world' deals a "blow" to "Western democracy" that has "repercussions in the Netherlands", as we saw in the passage cited above. On the level of the school, a proposal to create a Muslim prayer room leads to the venting of "bottled-up frustration". And on the level of personal encounters, they take place between Hajar and Daan but also between their family members. If we look closely, the threat of an advancing Islam can be seen on all three of these levels, with the love affair and DataCare College functioning as metonyms for society at large. 9/11 and its effects on Dutch society are repeated in the events at school and Hajar and Daan's relationship.

From the descriptions of discussions among the DataCare College staff, Islam appears as a constant threat to the original Dutch identity of the school. Anker takes several events that are often mentioned in the public debate as examples of the demise of the Dutch nature of the public space in the Netherlands and places them in his fictional school. He describes how a proposal "dripping of solidarity and the urge to integrate […] to refrain from serving alcohol at [graduations] out of reverence for the Muslim community of DataCare College" is accepted.[78] Meanwhile the traditional Christmas tree disappears for the same reasons and the prayer room is finally accepted as well. All this happens despite strong resistance from the staff. The school is, as it were, slowly and irrevocably taken over by 'the' Muslims.

The one-sidedness of the Muslim aggression towards the West can be seen in the love affair between the main characters as well. Daan's friends and relatives do not object to his affair with Hajar because she is Muslim, but because of the risks that a relationship with her carries. For example, Jimmy Pretzel, Daan's best friend (Daan's Benvolio, one could say), warns him: "They might blow your head off, who knows what those backwards Muslims are capable of".[79] At the point in the narrative where Jimmy says this, these words seem rather exaggerated and prejudiced. However, they are confirmed later in the story in what is no doubt the most violent encounter between a Muslim and a non-Muslim in Dutch literature between 1990 and 2005. After Hajar has disappeared for good, Daan meets her younger brother Khalid. Khalid and two of his friends beat Daan up. The following conversation ensues:

78 "Er zijn stemmen opgegaan om uit piëteit met de moslimgemeenschap van het DataCare College bij [dit soort gelegenheden geen alcohol meer te schenken"; "dit van solidariteit en integratiezin druipende idee". Ibdem: 204.

79 "Straks knallen ze je kop eraf, weet jij veel waar die achterlijke moslims toe in staat zijn." Ibidem: 95.

"Zo! Meester Hollander. Die mijn zus neukt. Die van mijn zuster een slettenbak heeft gemaakt." Hij rochelt en spuugt Daan in zijn gezicht.

"Khalid, alsjeblieft, waar is Hajar. Ze is spoorloos verdwenen. We houden van elkaar, dat weet je toch? Is dat soms verboden? Waar is ze?"

"Ja, dat is verboden meester Hollander, dat weet jij heel goed. Een moslimmeisje hoort bij een moslimjongen en niet bij een goddeloze vieze ouwe vent." […] Khalid laat ondertussen een pistool aan zijn wijsvinger heen en weer bungelen.

"Ik weet niks. Ik weet alleen dat zij een getrouwde vrouw is die zich door jouw vieze poten laat betasten, dat weet ik. Ze moet gestraft worden. En jij ook. Jullie verdienen straf. Ze zouden jullie moeten stenigen […] Vuile teringlijer", roept hij plotseling, haalt uit en slaat Daan met de kolf van het pistool tegen zijn slaap. Daan wankelt en valt op zijn zij.

"Alles hebben jullie verpest. Homo's zijn jullie, varkens, honden, vuile joden." Hij trapt Daan in zijn gezicht en loopt weg.

'Well! Mister Hollander. Who is fucking my sister. Who has turned my sister into a slut.' He spits in Daan's face.

'Khalid, please, where is Hajar. She's disappeared without a trace. We love each other; you know that, don't you? Is that not allowed? Where is she?

'No, Mister Hollander, that is not allowed, you know that very well. A Muslim girl belongs with a Muslim boy and not with an infidel dirty old man.' […] Meanwhile, Khalid has a gun swinging from his index finger.

'I know nothing. I only know she is a married woman who allows herself to be touched by your dirty paws, that's what I know. She has to be punished. And you too. You deserve punishment. They should stone you […]. Fucking asshole', he suddenly shouts, lashes out and hits Daan's temple with the butt of the gun. Daan staggers and falls sideways.

'You've ruined everything. You bunch of gays, pigs, dogs, dirty Jews.' He kicks Daan in the face and walks away.[80]

We have seen these ideas about Westerners as dirty before in the works of the authors that were discussed in the preceding chapters, as well as Khalid's disgust of intimate contact between Muslims and non-Muslims. Again, Anker uses the *signalling words* "pigs" and "dogs" that originated with Khalid el Moumni and were made even more famous by Pim Fortuyn. What is implied here, as it was in Benali's *Unclean* (*Onrein*, 2003), is that the kind of thinking that these words testify to, and the disgust of the Western Other that they express, inevitably lead to violence.

It is as if the only objection the Montagues have to a marriage between Romeo and Juliet was that the Capulets might kill Romeo. Thus, the intertextuality with Shakespeare's play in fact highlights the absence of mutual violence in the relationship between Islam and the West as they are represented on different

80 Ibidem: 263-265.

levels in Anker's novel. It is here that *Hajar and Daan* resembles *Gloriant* to a much greater extent. Jimmy's warning cited above, for instance, reads like an echo of the warning given to Gloriant, the Duke of Bruuyswijc, by his uncle Gheraert when he tells him of his love for the Muslim princess Florentine. Gheraert warns Gloriant that he fears "that you will come to regret" his voyage to Florentine's country, because her father will surely "cause you great pains".[81] When he does travel to meet her and they are found out, Florentine's countrymen scold her because she "lies […] with a Christian man/Who is not of our faith".[82] Thus, while Flortentine's family despise Gloriant because he is Christian, his uncle merely has one objection: that her family might be violent towards Gloriant.

Another similarity, as noted before, is the quick conversion of the Muslim girl. Hajar's smooth transition from "backwards" Muslim to enlightened and atheist Westerner reminds the reader of Florentine's almost automatic and unconditional conversion to Christianity in *Gloriant*. Just like Florentine is thus saved and "protected against the fires of Hell",[83] Hajar is liberated from her fears by acquainting herself with "reason".

The most significant similarity between *Hajar and Daan* and *Gloriant* for the current analysis is the one between the development of the main characters in both texts. In *Gloriant*, his courtly love for Florentine cures the Duke of Bruuyswijc of his "dorpenie" – an untranslatable medieval Dutch word that shares its etymological roots with the word 'dorp' (village) and that can be considered "the catchword for the uncivilised nature that was supposed to be characteristic of country people".[84] In *Hajar and Daan*, as in Anker's other work, it is rather the morally uncivilised nature of the modern, decadent city that the main character must somehow overcome, but the result is the same: through his love for Hajar, Daan becomes a more refined, more civilised person. Anker has Hajar stir him into exchanging his *Donald Duck* magazines for Dutch classic literature and giving up his role-playing games and wild nightlife for studying national history and organising excursions to Rome. Belgian literary critic Hugo Brems criticised Anker for this in his overview of post-war Dutch literature. According to Brems, Hajar's positive influence on Daan is a stereotype that is "well-known from colonial literature" with Hajar serving as an "archetype of

81 "Ic duchte dt u dese vaert sal rouwen […] Hi sal u beraden pine." *Gloriant*, v. 476-477.

82 "Ende leghet nu met enen kerstenen man/Die niet en es van onser wet". Ibidem, v. 754-755.

83 "[G]od […] motti mie/Bescermen vander hellen brant". Ibidem, v. 1040-1041.

84 "[H]et trefwoord voor de onbeschaafdheid die plattelanders zou kenmerken". Herman Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1400-1560* (2007): 153.

'the alien': a possibility for Western man to be liberated from banality, indifference and emotional poverty".[85]

Be that as it may, Anker does not need colonialist stereotypes to integrate the theme of a morally derailed man who attempts to embrace a more authentic existence after a chastening experience into his novels. In his other works, the purity of the village – which is, of course, a cliché as well – made this liberation and a homecoming possible for the main character. In *Hajar and Daan*, this experience is located in the non-Western world. This is presented in the overdramatic way typical for this novel – to search for your 'true' self is in many ways just the new fad among Daan's hipster friends – and yet the urge to find peace and to become whole is undeniably "very pure". After his IT business has gone bankrupt, the *nouveau riche* Jimmy Pretzel moves to Israel to study his Jewish roots, re-evaluating his life in Amsterdam as "far removed from the things, far removed from reality".[86] Daan's Surinamese friend Brian Reemnet returns to "Drietabbetje […], the Maroon village where he spent his youth […], the real place, where he feels at ease".[87] Daan has no such non-urban authenticity to which he could return – maybe this is why he is the most bland of all the men "without qualities" in Anker's oeuvre. However, this is where Islam offers a solution.

For Daan, the catharsis that is so typical of Anker's work takes place in Morocco and is found in an implicit embrace of Islam. His transformation is the mirror image of the one made by Hajar: while Hajar left her religion behind when she became acquainted with Enlightenment, Daan has lost sight of reason while searching for Hajar. After all, the novel ends with a description of Daan, who spends his days in a Moroccan marketplace:

> Kijk, wie zit daar in de hitte, de stank, het lawaai, achter een uitstalling van tweedehands schoenen, daar, die man in grijs-bruin gestreepte djelleba, zich noemende Daniil […]? Het zal gebeuren – *redeloos weten* – dat op een dag de zon door een wolk zal vallen om een grande dame in witte chador in het licht te stellen […] – ze heeft hem herkend, ze stapt achteruit van verbijstering […] ze schuift haar doek voor haar mond en prevelt: "Daan" […] hun zielen razen op elkaar af om

85 "[Hajar staat] voor het archetype van 'de vreemdeling' […]: een mogelijkheid tot bevrijding van de westerse mens uit de banaliteit, de onverschilligheid en de emotionele armoede." Hugo Brems, *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen – Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1945-2005* (2006): 681.

86 "[V]er weg van de dingen, ver weg van reality". Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 233.

87 "Drietabbetje […], het bosnegerdorp waar hij zijn jeugd heeft doorgebracht […], daar is the real place, daar voelt hij zich rustig." Ibidem: 257-258.

> middenin het dreunende zingen van de koranschool op de hoek – la illah illa Allah – kopje-onder te gaan in de kolkende stilte van hun eeuwige liefde.
>
> Look at who is sitting there in the heat, the stench, the noise, behind a display of second-hand shoes, there, that man in a grey-brown-striped djellaba, calling himself Daniil […]? It will happen – *knowing against reason* – one day the sun will break through a cloud and place a grande dame in white chador into the light […] – she has recognised him, she steps back in astonishment […] she places her cloth in front of her mouth and mumbles: "Daan" […] their souls speed towards each other in the droning singing of the Koran school on the corner – la ilah illa Allah – and drown in the swirling silence of their eternal love.[88]

It is significant that Daan calls himself Daniil: this refers to an earlier passage in the novel, where the lovers discuss the meaning of each other's names. It occurs right after they have argued because Daan told Hajar (who is still religious at that point) that he does not believe in God. Hajar tells him that she has looked up the meaning of 'Daan':

> 'Niks. Daan betekent niks.'
> 'Maar het komt van Daniël, toch?'
> 'Zo heet jij niet. Jij heet alleen Daan en Daan betekent niks. Daniël betekent "God is mijn rechter", dus dat is ook niet erg van toepassing […].'
>
> 'Nothing. Daan doesn't mean anything.'
> 'But it's derived from Daniël, isn't it?'
> 'That's not your name. Your name is just Daan and Daan doesn't mean anything. Daniël means "God is my judge", so that isn't very suitable either […].'[89]

The symbolism should not be missed here: this man without qualities has gone from meaningless (Daan) to meaningful (Daniil) and the meaning that he has gained is representative of a submission to a God he did not believe in. Together with the "la ilah illa Allah" of the Koran school, his 'homecoming' in foreign parts is given an air of religiosity.

This is reinforced by a description of an earlier attempt by Daan to find Hajar in Morocco. There we read how he felt a "sudden disgust" when he was offered alcohol and then, when he heard the call for prayer, "attempts to open his mind to the muezzin".[90] He gives up drinking and returns, "shaven bald", as a pilgrim from the pilgrimage to Mecca.[91] Here, the Islamic is given a positive connotation: apart from threat and violence, it connotes authenticity and home-

88 Ibidem: 287. Emphasis added.

89 Ibidem: 97-98.

90 "[H]ij probeert voor de muezzin […] zijn geest open te stellen." Ibidem: 277.

91 Ibidem: 286; 282. At the end of the hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca) male pilgrims shave their heads.

coming. Thus, we can indeed conclude that his contact with Hajar liberates Daan, as Brems claims, from "banality, indifference and emotional poverty".

Does this mean that the novel perpetuates colonialist stereotypes? One could doubt whether Hajar's role should be interpreted that unambiguously, as Anker seems very aware of the clichéd nature of certain Orientalist notions. The end of the novel is certainly a cliché: a Westerner is driven to irrationality by the sensual seductions of the East; this modern Western man is stranded in an Eastern marketplace, dazed and mesmerised by the Orient and deprived of his "reason". In the "knowing against reason" that he finds there – that is, in the cliché itself – the utopian coming together of 'Western' and 'Islamic' or 'Dutch' and 'Moroccan' is finally possible. Thus, the utopia that we have seen among the other authors as well, represented by bookcases, lies and mirages, is here a special state of mind: Daan concludes that "his mind has advanced so much that the true finding of Hajar will only take place in this advanced position and not in a house in quotidian reality".[92]

Utopia may be found in this cliché. In a similar way as Bouazza does, Anker uses a certain irony to distance himself from the Orientalist and colonialist stereotypes he perpetuates. That Hajar would be an "archetype of 'the alien'", as Brems describes, is acknowledged within the text itself and becomes a trope. This is done in the typical manner of this novel: "almost camp and yet very pure":

> Onzin natuurlijk maar onverbiddelijk doemt nu een beeld op van Hajar in de klassieke haremkleding die te midden van andere vrouwen loom haar hand in het water schept aan de rand van een ruisende fontein op een van de vele binnenplaatsen – nee laat maar, het is goed, laat maar stromen die beelden, al is het allemaal onzin, het geeft zijn bruid even een plek, het is een oud verhaal, uit kinderboeken, uit duizend-en-één-nacht, sst…
>
> Nonsense, of course, but unrelentingly an image appears of Hajar in classic harem clothes, scooping her hand lazily in the water at the side of a fountain in one of the many inner courts – no, let it be, it is good, let those images flow, even though it is all nonsense, it gives his bride a place for a while, it is an old story, from children's books, from *Arabian Nights*, ssh…[93]

That Daan in fact imagines himself to be already united with Hajar is put in a different perspective by this Orientalist fantasy (at the same time "nonsense" and, it seems, a last hope for Daan): after all, Hajar has clearly become a part of the West and its grand narrative of the Enlightenment and it is thus questionable

92 "Het lijkt erop dat zijn geest al zo ver doorgeschoven is dat het werkelijk terugvinden van Hajar pas in die doorgeschoven positie kan plaatsvinden en niet in een huis in de gewone werkelijkheid." Ibidem: 282.

93 Ibidem: 275.

whether Daan must search in Morocco for the "advanced position" where he can be united with Hajar. Ambiguously, the novel seems to say on the one hand that Daan is chasing an image (an *image*-ination, as I called it in the last chapter) of Hajar, rather than the real person. Has Daan, by moving towards Islam and Morocco, not moved away from Hajar, who was, after all, leaving all that behind? On the other hand, the conclusion seems to be very similar to the one found in Bouazza's work, namely that difference and mutual stereotyping are so omnipresent that only in an imagined world – however stereotyped – can 'Islam' and 'the West' or 'Muslims' and 'the Dutch' come together.

4.2.3. Narrative perspective

In this last subsection, I will first discuss how this novel invites the reader to judge the narrated events. Then, I will analyse the strategic presence and absence of a moral offered within the text. In conclusion, I will reflect on the extent to which we can conclude that there is an exclusively Western point of view in the text and what this means for the narrative.

Given how important Anker finds it that a novel confronts the reader with its author's "truth", it is quite paradoxical that in *Hajar and Daan* it remains unclear how the narrator and implied author relates to some of the most important issues raised in the text. Ultimately, the narrator is no moral judge who tells right from wrong – that role is expressly left to the reader. This is partly done through the narrative situation, which is given the nature of a court case at the beginning of the novel.

The silence of the narrator when certain ethical issues and loaded subjects are dealt with is made all the more remarkable because he[94] is very much present on other occasions. He often comments on events and the actions of his characters from what Anker himself has called an "old-fashioned nineteenth-century narrative perspective".[95] This perspective is decidedly Dutch and Western in *Hajar and Daan*, despite the polyphony of the novel and the fact that the narrator repeatedly shows that he is at home in all kinds of environments and discourses. Anker's novel is admittedly too polyphonic to conclude that old fears and a growing rejection of Muslims and Islam in the public debate are merely being confirmed. It is, for instance, suggested that Hajar's violent younger brother Khalid has psychological problems and had been a criminal and a hooligan before he became a fundamentalist. His aggressive hatred towards Westerners could just as well have been directed towards the police or a rival football

94 In using "he" here, I follow Susan Lanser who suggests using "he" when the author is male and "she" when the author is female if the gender of the narrator is left undefined in the text. Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act* (1981): 166.

95 Cited in Erik De Bruin, "Iedere schrijver wil iets nieuws maken" (2005): 43.

team. And Hajar's father is not the traditional, rigid Muslim man one would expect: in the end, he accepts the relationship between Hajar and Daan surprisingly easily. Moreover, the narrator never explicitly speaks his mind on the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands. And yet, because of the narrator's explicitly Western perspective, Muslims remain the unknown Other.

Although the largest part of the novel is narrated by a classic extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator, there is a short intermezzo in the first chapter in which Daan himself suddenly becomes the narrator. This passage follows the description of the first time Daan and Hajar made love and starts with the words: "This is how it happened, esteemed members of the jury, that fifth-year student Hajar Nait Sibaha, still seventeen years old at the time, cycled home with me of her own accord".[96] For a moment, it seems as if the rest of the story will be told by Daan, as autodiegetic narrator, but then he remarks: "I have to admit that I lied to the author of this report when I said that we had had scarcely any other contact with each other than the exchange of furtive looks".[97] Not much later, the first narrator takes over for the rest of the text. Thus, at the beginning of the text, the narrative situation of a plea is created: the narrator is the "author" of a "report", which is apparently meant to inform a jury about Daan's life story so that he may be judged.

The role of this jury remains unclear and is not embedded in the rest of the narrative. Thus, the effect of the intermezzo is first and foremost that it focuses the attention of the reader on the story's synthetic sphere of meaning. There, it has two functions: first, the reader becomes aware that the narrator's attitude towards the narrated events is important; second, as an intertextual reference it stresses that the story deals with an illicit love.

A man who starts a description of his sexual contact with a young girl with an address to a jury reminds the reader of texts like J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and, most notably, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. The reference to *Lolita* is reinforced by the arguments Daan advances during his defence: for instance, Daan says, "Hajar was no beginner in the sweet game we were playing, you will have understood this. It seems reasonable that you will take this into consideration

96 "Zo is het gegaan, geachte leden van de jury, de toen nog zeventienjarige Hajar Nait Sibaha uit vijf VWO is uit eigen beweging met mij meegefietst naar huis." Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 30.

97 "[I]k moet toegeven dat ik tegen de opsteller van dit verslag gejokt heb toen ik zei dat we nauwelijks een ander contact hadden met elkaar dan de uitwisseling van besmuikte blikken." Ibidem.

[…]. There had been a boy next door, last year."[98] It is exactly the same argument Humbert Humbert uses when attempting to gloss over the morally questionable nature of his behaviour: Lolita had had intercourse with a boy before he touched her.

This intertextual reference offers a reading strategy, inviting the reader to resist Daan and the "author of this report": if the text is indeed a report for a jury, it is, just like Humbert Humbert's narrative, extremely suspicious. This is reinforced by the blatant rhetoric of Daan's plea:

> Ik moet u zeggen, hooggeëerde leden van de jury: het kon me geen bal schelen! Ik wist wel dat er grenzen waren maar dat waren niet de grenzen van de liefde want die is grenzeloos. Het waren en zijn de grenzen van een bemoeizuchtige moraal die ik minacht […]. Schaamte? […] Waarvoor zou ik mij moeten schamen? Misschien helpt het als ik u zeg dat er ook gewenste intimiteiten bestaan. Ook als het een Marokkaans meisje betreft. Ook als ze zeventien is (en de leraar nog net tweeëndertig).[99]

> I have to say to you, most honoured members of the jury: I couldn't care less! I knew there were borders, but those were not the borders of love, because love is borderless. They were and are the borders of a meddlesome morality which I hold in contempt. […] For what should I be ashamed? Perhaps it would help if I explain that there is such a thing as consensual intimacy. Even if the girl concerned is Moroccan. Even if she is seventeen (and the teacher just under thirty-three).

It is striking how, as I mentioned earlier, Hajar's Moroccan heritage receives the most attention. Daan mentions her age and the fact that she was his pupil, but these are not the main problems. Thus, the reference to Nabokov functions here quite similar to the way in which it functioned in Bouazza's short story "Apollien": the relationship between the main characters is linked to arguably the most scandalous affair in Western literary history, with the implication that an affair between a Muslim woman and a Dutch man is, at least for some, just as reprehensible.

Thus, it becomes clear to the reader that the narrative has an important moral dimension: is the relationship really as reprehensible as the one in *Lolita* or is it only so according to a "meddlesome morality" that defines the narrow limits of love and that should be rejected? Moreover, the reader is made aware of the narrator's possible unreliability, of the fact that an *authorial audience* may be called upon to distance itself from him and his *narrative audience*. Now, the only thing that is needed is a clue – from the implicit author, for instance, or, if he

98 "Hajar was geen beginneling in het zoete spel, dat zult u begrepen hebben. Het lijkt me goed als u dat in uw overwegingen betrekt […]. Er was een buurjongen geweest, vorig jaar." Ibidem: 31.

99 Ibidem: 32.

turns out to be reliable after all, from the narrator – that will make clear which (moral) judgment is expected of the reader. Or at least, in line with Anker's claim that a book should testify to the author's "truth", what the moral judgment of the text is, so that the reader may react to that.

However, no such judgment is given in the text, despite the fact that during the intermezzo Anker has Daan imply that before the narrative is over, there will be a verdict; Daan says to the "jury", "your existence may be shadowy, you certainly have enough power still to make sure Hajar and I *will be judged*".[100] This enigmatic remark can be read as a metaphor for the reading process itself. Because the text does not make a clear judgment, the reader has to decide whether Daan may have a relationship with Hajar, despite the fact that she is his pupil, despite her age, but first and foremost, despite the fact that she is "a Moroccan girl".

Yet, throughout the narrative it becomes increasingly remarkable that the narrator refrains from passing a moral judgment on Daan's behaviour, but also on the tensions between communities in Dutch society. For this narrator can be a very present and moralising voice in the story. For instance, when the class about Enlightenment is described, he scolds Daan for using "Lyotard's 'Grand Narrative', a notion derived from postmodern philosophy, all wrong". The narrator sets Daan straight:

> Lyotard [toonde aan] dat veel grote verhalen inmiddels failliet zijn of op zijn minst ernstig beschadigd, dat bijvoorbeeld de grote verhalen van de Redelijkheid en de Menselijkheid kopje-onder zijn gegaan in Auschwitz, dat de Broederschap vermist is geraakt in de kapitalistische uitstulping die we "mondialisering" noemen, dat het Verhaal van de Multiculturaliteit dreigt te verzuipen in achterstandswijken en stagnerende integratie. Vertel ze dat maar eens, Daan, of weet je dat niet? De krant weer niet gelezen? Niet opgelet op cursus? Voeg dat maar eens toe aan je vrijblijvende praatje over de Verlichting – ja, sorry hoor!
>
> Lyotard [made clear] how many grand narratives have gone bankrupt by now, or at least been severely damaged. That for instance the grand narratives of Reason and Humanity drowned in Auschwitz, that Brotherhood has gone missing in the capitalist bulge we call 'globalisation', that the Narrative of Multiculturalism is about to get bedraggled in run-down neighbourhoods and halting integration. Tell them about that, Daan, or don't you know about it? Have you once again not read the newspaper? Didn't you pay attention during the course? Add that to your uncalled for little talk about Enlightenment, why don't you – well, excuse me![101]

100 "[U]w bestaan mag dan schimmig zijn, u heeft stellig nog macht genoeg om over mij en Hajar te láten oordelen." Ibidem: 31.

101 Ibidem: 27.

This very outspoken voice returns time and again in the novel, with remarks such as "no, Daan, you've got it all wrong […], think, man!" when Daan confuses the Middle Ages with the Renaissance.[102] At times the reader is addressed directly, in accordance with an "old-fashioned nineteenth-century narrative perspective". After a long description of the backgrounds of Daan and his parents, the reader is called to give meaning to what has just been narrated:

> Jaak en Jannie [Daans ouders]. Hebben wij enig begrip gekregen van Daans roots, of beter, heeft een Daan roots? Afgezien van Daans Diemense dage begrijpen we dat Jannies lieve losvastigheid nooit de mal kon ontwikkelen waarin een Daan-uit-een-stuk gebakken had kunnen worden en het uitzicht op Jaaks "permanente revolutie" biedt weliswaar een rood fond, maar Daans grijstinten willen daar maar niet als contrast zichtbaar op worden.
>
> Jaak and Jannie [Daan's parents]. Have we come to understand anything about Daan's roots, or rather, does a Daan have roots? […] we understand that Jannie's sweet shallowness could never develop the mould in which a Daan-of-one-piece could have been baked and although the view on Jaak's 'permanent revolution' offers a red background, Daan's shades of grey aren't visible on it as a contrast.[103]

Here, narrative audience and authorial audience seem to coincide; the reader who is involved in the narrative will assume that Daan's family background is given to characterise Daan himself. Thus, he or she will, just like the *narrative audience* that is implied by "we" in this passage, try to interpret Daan's roots together with the narrator.

It is, however, noticeable that the narrator is quite selective in speaking his mind. Regularly, his attitude towards a specific opinion vented in the novel is left unclear by the use of free indirect speech. Take for instance the following passage:

> Gelukkig vind je ze het minst op het vwo – hoe meer IQ des te minder hijabs – maar in het algemeen wordt het op scholen als het DataCare College steeds moeilijker werkweken, excursies en schoolfeesten te organiseren, en wil je de ouders overtuigen van het belang van deze activiteiten voor hun dochters dan lukt dat niet omdat ze niet komen opdagen […]. Hoe lager de opleiding van de ouders, allochtoon of niet, des te meer ze vinden dat de opleiding van hun kinderen een zaak van de school is, zelfs opvoeding willen ze daar wel onderbrengen. Daan herinnert zich in ieder geval de taxichauffeur die over zijn zoon zei: As hij niet wil laastere, geef je 'm maar gewoon een slag voor s'n harses, werkt altaad.
>
> Luckily, you won't find as many among pre-university students – the higher the IQ, the fewer hijabs – but in general, it is becoming increasingly difficult to organise project weeks and school parties at schools like DataCare College and if you want to

102 "[N]ee Daan, helemaal fout […], denk toch na!" Ibidem: 213.
103 Ibidem: 93.

> convince the parents of the importance of these activities for their daughters, they won't show up […]. The lower the education of the parents, *allochtone* or not, the more they think that their children's education is the concern of the school, they'd even prefer the school to take care of the upbringing. In any case, Daan remembers the taxi driver who said about his son: 'If'e doesn't listen, ya just smack 'im in da face, that'll do.'[104]

To whom must we ascribe the denigrating remark "the higher the IQ, the fewer hijabs"? To Daan, cited in free indirect speech? Or to the narrator, who addresses the reader more often in these sorts of asides, such as in a diatribe about "the demolishing of the educational system"?[105] And if this is the narrator's opinion, is the reader expected to agree with him like in the less morally charged passage about Daan's parents? In that case, the opinion expressed could thus be ascribed to the implied author – which a reader who knows a bit more about Anker and has recognised that at least some of the opinions expressed in these kinds of remarks about education and society are held by the author himself, might be inclined to do anyway.[106] Anker has claimed that the "old-fashioned nineteenth-century narrative perspective" offers him the possibility to intervene in the story: "I can comment or directly address my character from that angle", he said in the same interview.[107] However, in passages like this, it remains unclear what the comment given by the narrator is – and whether the narrator can indeed coincide with the author, as Anker seems to suggest here.

All in all, *Hajar and Daan* offers the same kind of reading experience that we have also seen in some of Bouazza's stories. Through the reference to recognisable voices from the public debate and the expression of opinions that many would find questionable, the reader is titillated to search for the point of view expressed by the text and the author regarding the controversial issues that are being dealt with. However, the outspoken narrator who could have been a moral guide here (a possibility expressly pointed at by the fact that he is so outspoken in other instances) remains silent in these passages. Thus, the moment the moral

104 Ibidem: 235. A hijab is a headscarf.

105 "[D]e afbraak van het onderwijs". Ibidem: 33-34.

106 This diatribe about "the demolishing of the educational system" is a literal repetition of an op-ed written by Anker about the same subject. Cf. Robert Anker, "Over de nog altijd erbarmelijke wijze waarop op de meeste middelbare scholen de liefde tot de literatuur en het helder lezen wordt afgeleerd." (2003): 65-79. I agree with Liesbeth Kortals Altes in taking the implied author to be a construction by the reader and thus influenced by what the reader knows about the author, not just from the text he or she is reading, but in general. Cf. Liesbeth Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation. The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (expected 2013).

107 Cited in Erik de Bruin, "Elke schrijver wil iets nieuws maken" (2005): 43.

issues that lie at the heart of Hajar and Daan are being dealt with, the points of view of the narrator and author become ambiguous.

The narrative situation in which the text is presented as a "report" on Daan Hollander explains another striking aspect of this text. This is in fact the same aspect that is highlighted by the notion that the interpretative framework offered through the intertextuality with *Romeo and Juliet* does not really fit the story of *Hajar and Daan*; the framework offered by comparing it with *Gloriant* fits much better. While the title of the novel is *Hajar and Daan*, Daan is its real (and actually only) main character, as well as the most important focaliser of the narrative. His youth is extensively discussed by the narrator and when the lovers are separated, it is Daan who the narrative follows. Hajar's life is hardly addressed, except for what she tells Daan.

We can also see this aspect in two visits that are described in the novel, one where Hajar visits Daan's house for the first time and one where Daan visits her house. While in the first instance we have Daan (or the narrator, this remains unclear throughout most of the passage) looking at Hajar looking at Daan's house, in the second instance we are told how "Daan's eyes [wander] through the Moroccan interior".[108] Daan's first trip to Morocco is narrated in a similar way:

> [Bouwvakkers] kijken nieuwsgierig naar Daan, die de hoek omslaat en in een klein marktje terecht komt, een kleine soek.
>
> Een boerenvrouw draagt een vreemde, met zwarte, pluizige banen afgezette strohoed bovenop een kin en voorhoofd bedekkende witte chador die weer over een rood-wit gestreepte rok valt – een soort klederdracht?[109]

> [Construction workers] look at Daan curiously, as he turns a corner and ends up on a market, a small souq.
>
> A farmer's wife wears a strange straw hat, trimmed with black, fluffy frills on top of a white chador which in its turn falls over a red-white striped skirt – a kind of traditional dress?

The narrator explores Morocco together with Daan and that which Daan does not know, the narrator does not know. The all-knowing attitude with which he corrected Daan on Lyotard, for instance, is gone here. Because of this choice of focalisation and narrative perspective, the Moroccan and Muslim subcultures are only seen through the eyes of an outsider, while the other environments that are described in the novel are presented from the perspective of an insider.

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108 "Daans ogen [dwalen] door het Marokkaanse interieur". Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 97.

109 Ibidem: 270.

Thus, the narrator's perspective is an emphatically Dutch perspective. This becomes clear quite early in the novel, where the narrator is lamenting the demise of the Dutch educational system in which "[t]o acquire knowledge and to pass on *our* culture lost their priority".[110] With "our culture" it is clear that he means Dutch culture, a culture that the narrator apparently shares with those he addresses. It is up to the reader to decide the extent to which this *narrative audience* coincides with the *authorial audience* – namely, the extent to which he or she is expected to see "our culture" first and foremost as a Dutch culture.

I am not trying to 'prove' from a postcolonial or gender critical perspective that this text insidiously imposes a male, Eurocentric perspective on the reader. That this perspective is omnipresent in *Hajar and Daan* results first and foremost from the fact that the novel focuses on Daan's experiences and life story. Yet, it is remarkable that this narrator, who is constructed as generally well-informed, comes across as someone who knows surprisingly little about Moroccan and Muslim cultures. According to one critic, Anker is a "chameleon-like writer who can imagine himself in a lot of situations and switches between styles and jargons with great ease".[111] One could say the same about the narrator of *Hajar and Daan*, but not when it comes to the world of the Moroccan community in the Netherlands and Islam. This is particularly noticeable because of the extensive descriptions of the many subcultures and worlds of contemporary Amsterdam: nightlife, the high society to which Daan is introduced by his *nouveau riche* friend Jimmy Pretzel, Daan's decadent holidays in Ibiza and Thailand, role-playing games and staff meetings.

As noted before, the novel is constructed as a highly polyphonic text, for instance through extensively citing from the discourses that are particular to the different environments that are being described: fast talk about sex, pills and sniffing, the highly particular language of a Dungeons & Dragons session permeated with peculiar English terms,[112] the *nouveau riche* drivel of Jimmy, Brian Reemnet's Surinamese accent and the regional dialects of Daan's teaching colleagues. However, the voices of Muslims – except Hajar's – are hardly audible in the novel. DataCare College, where Daan teaches, is said to have an 80 per cent Muslim student population, but Daan only interacts with ethnically Dutch pupils. The Turks and Moroccans cheer and whoop, but only a boy with the typ-

110 "Het verwerven van kennis en het doorgeven van onze cultuur moesten hun eerste plaats afstaan." Ibidem: 33.

111 "Hij is een kameleontische schrijver die zich in veel kan inleven en met groot gemak van register wisselt." Tom van Deel, "Haar standvastigheid, haar lieftalligheid" (2004).

112 Dungeons & Dragons is a role-playing game inspired by fantasy literature in which participants play the part of a fantasy creature and experience adventures guided by a Dungeon master.

ically Dutch name 'Thijs' has a serious discussion with Daan about his claims concerning the Enlightenment and Islam.[113] Elsewhere, acting or speaking Muslims are mostly absent as well. There is a Moroccan janitor who speaks a few sentences about nice girls: "iz ghood, girlz, always ghood".[114] A Moroccan colleague makes a short remark during the staff meeting about the proposed prayer room, but he hardly makes any point and his colleagues complain: "Abdel talks *so* softly".[115] And then there is the paranoid raving of Khalid when he beats up Daan.

At one point in the novel, we read: "Hajar and Daan […] knew that the final embrace would set loose very different forces, forces that were bound on destruction".[116] At that moment it is already clear that those "forces" refer to Islam, which is barely given a face and a voice in this novel. Thus, despite Hajar's presence and the utopian possibility of a state of mind in which Islam and the West can come together, Muslims are represented as an unknown Other, of whom even the seemingly all-knowing narrator knows almost nothing. We have seen Islam represented that way in Anker's earlier work as well, but it was always embedded, ascribed as it was to immoral characters. Here, however, with the otherwise outspoken narrator remaining silent and little to nothing to hold onto in the rest of the text, it is left to the reader to interpret the validity of the notion of a threatening Islam.

5. Concluding remarks

In his history of late medieval Dutch literature, literary critic Herman Pleij wrote that "[t]he triumphalism of Christianity" is an important element of *Gloriant*. According to Pleij, this play offers:

> literary solutions for the conflicts with the Muslim world. […] Seemingly impossible love relations between Mohammedans and Christians – or vice versa – lead in no

113 Robert Anker, *Hajar en Daan* (2004): 29. In a 1994 short story by Anker, we see something similar: the narrator, a teacher, has barely any control over his classroom. He discusses the curriculum or their bad behaviour with pupils called "Janine", "Eric", "Oscar" and "Sander". However, 'foreign' names like "Soeradj" and "Abdeslam" only appear in short reprimands. Robert Anker, *Volledig ontstemde piano* (1994): 102-103.

114 Ibidem: 145.

115 "Abdel praat zó zacht." Ibidem: 72.

116 "Hajar en Daan […] wisten dat de finale omhelzing heel andere krachten los zou maken, krachten die uit waren op vernietiging." Ibidem: 72.

> time to unconditional conversions by the Muslims, who at first looked so threatening, crowned by happy marriages.[117]

At first sight, the modern version of *Gloriant* discussed in this chapter of *Hajar and Daan* testifies to what one could call the 'triumphalism of the Enlightenment'. This interpretation of the text is reinforced by the fact that the narrative perspective is clearly Dutch and Western and the impression is sometimes given that the author and narrator coincide. Seen from this perspective, the Muslim world is an unknown and threatening factor in the novel that has to be neutralised in one way or the other. Because 'the West' is confronted on all levels – personally, at school, in society and globally – by an advancing 'Islam', it seems as if strife and violence are the only ways in which this can happen.

Just like the medieval play *Gloriant*, however, this novel offers a non-violent "literary solution". Hajar converts smoothly to faithlessness and reason after Daan's simple class on "the Grand Narrative of Enlightenment" and becomes "his bride". This literary solution resembles Anker's prognosis for Dutch society, where he foresees a future in which the presence of Muslims in Dutch society will no longer be problematic because they will have entered "superior Western culture" – that is, they will no longer be Muslim.

The novel has indeed been read in this way, as becomes clear in the op-ed by Gerry van der List that I cited in my analysis of the relationship between *Hajar and Daan* and the contemporary public debate. However, Van der List ignored the ambiguous attitude of the text towards 'the West' and its "Grand Narrative of Enlightenment". After all, the narrator declares this grand narrative "bankrupt" and the reason and faithlessness that came with it have become pure hedonism and a lack of culture in the lives of Daan and his friends. The post-modern impossibility of coherence has led, so it seems, to a generation of characterless – or rather, identity-less – pleasure-seekers who have to go and find 'themselves', their "roots", in non-Western countries. Daan ultimately experiences his 'homecoming' dressed in a djellaba in a market in Fes, lost in Orientalist fantasies and "knowing against reason" – but with a certainty and 'wholeness' that was lacking in his decadent existence in Amsterdam. Admittedly, this is exactly the kind of colonial stereotype that Hugo Brems claimed could be found in *Hajar and Daan* and which Benali and especially Bouazza ridicule in

117 "Zo worden er ook oplossingen aangedragen voor de conflicten met de wereld van de islam. […] Ogenschijnlijk onmogelijke liefdesverhoudingen van mohammedanen met christenen – of omgekeerd – leiden binnen de kortste keren tot onvoorwaardelijke bekeringen van de aanvankelijk zo dreigend ogende islamieten, bekroond door gelukkige huwelijken." Herman Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1400-1560* (2007): 152-153.

their play with lies and masks: the non-Western as a source of identity and authenticity.

Apparently, this homecoming and the return to authenticity, recurring themes in Anker's work, are in keeping with the author's deeply felt life experience. In that way, his work is strikingly similar to the kind of 'literature of homesickness' that is often linked with migrant authors. In it, we find the "tragic and exciting restlessness" and "fetishising of the location of descent" that supposedly characterises migrant literature.[118] Thus, it is not without reason that Anker suggests, in his contribution to the debate about "writing between cultures", that he is in fact a migrant author since he once migrated from village to city.

In this respect, he resembles Abdolah more than any other author in this study. With Abdolah, we saw the same kind of dichotomy between on the one hand a culture of origin that is presented as narrow-minded, but also familiar and easy to comprehend, and on the other hand the current milieu, which is liberated but also confusing, loose and chaotic. Like Abdolah, Anker defends modern, liberal (and, in Anker's case, decidedly cosmopolitan) life as the only relevant lifestyle, while at the same time creating literary characters who cannot or can only barely stay on their feet while living this kind of life. It has to be noted, however, that Anker presents this dichotomy with much more ironic distance and ambiguity than Abdolah, both in his essays on literature and society and in his literary work.

In this literary work, Islam and Muslims are increasingly represented as a disruptive element in the dichotomy of city and countryside: they are *of* the city, but *like* the village. As an alternative to the modern life that his characters want to embrace so badly, they are repugnant but attractive as well. After all, they may be "backwards" but they represent the same kind of purity as the village, which can neutralise the decadence and (moral) deterioration of the city. This happens in a bizarre and grotesque way in the fictional play "Theatre Destruction: or 360 Years Late" in *A Sort of England*, but we see this aspect of Islam most of all in *Hajar and Daan*. In this novel, the dichotomy between city and countryside is in fact replaced by the one between the West and Islam. In this latter dichotomy, however, there is a new element. The village is represented as passive and docile in Anker's work: it is left by the main characters and waits patiently until they return, broken and in need of a lost authenticity. Islam, however, is aggressive and militant: the village as avenging fury. In Anker's first two novels this notion is explicitly embedded in the experience of morally corrupt main characters. As white and Western, but also exhausted, men, they fear

118 Cf. Chapter 3, p. 46-47.

the rise of the vital non-Western Other and as former ‘village boys’ they fear the vengeance of its ‘villageness’.

In *Hajar and Daan*, it is presented much more ambiguously, mostly because the novel gives so many examples of the dangers that the presence of Muslims implies. The positive role of ‘authenticity’ and the ‘homecoming’ of Islam are presented just as ambiguously. Daan’s ‘catharsis’ at the end of the novel is no doubt meant to be an authentic experience, but it is at the same time clearly presented as an experience made possible by Orientalism and stereotypes. The ‘wholeness’ offered by Islam is, very much like Anker already described in his 1989 episodic poem *Good Manners*, ultimately just an appearance.

Beyond this appearance, the irrevocable conclusion of *Hajar and Daan* seems to be that a relationship between a Muslim girl and a Dutch man is virtually impossible. That conclusion is significant because Anker has filled his novel to the brim with *social energy*, as I called it in Chapter 2 (following Stephen Greenblatt). He does so by making blatant references to the public debate and using *signalling words* and loaded notions. Pim Fortuyn, 9/11, Ayaan Hirsi Ali: they all reinforce the suggestion that, like the relationship between Hajar and Daan, the relationship between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ is doomed and a clash of civilisations is inevitable.

Of course, it is suggested that these differences can be overcome by love. This *amor vincit omnia* is the cliché at the core of Anker’s novel that is connected through its intertextuality to love stories such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*. But though the ideal is given, it is never realised: Romeo and Juliet die and love is conquered by grim reality. Hajar and Daan’s love for each other enables them to move towards one other – Hajar embraces Enlightenment and reason and Daan opens his mind to Islam and “knowing against reason” – but it is of no use to the lovers. It seems that the lovers can only come together – and, by extension, Islamic and Western people can coexist or even blend together – in an “advanced position” of the mind: in the fictional reality of a book or in the final verdict of the reader.

7. Conclusion

> *[O]ù pourraient-ils jamais se rencontrer, sauf dans la voix immatérielle qui prononce leur énumération, sauf sur la page qui la transcrit? Où peuvent-ils se juxtaposer sinon dans le non-lieu du langage?*
>
> Michel Foucault

1. "Us and them, *my ass*"

On 7 November 2005, Martin Bril, a famous Dutch columnist, wrote in *de Volkskrant* that he was fed up with all the attention being paid to Muslims and Islam in the public debate: "Could we not just continue as we did before: without taking any notice of each other? I guess not. Too bad."[1] He went on to describe a special encounter he had had a few days earlier in Amsterdam. As he was sitting in his car, he was in a "bad mood" while listening to a news item about "the suburbs of Paris, where another thousand cars had been burned down".[2] While he was waiting for a red light, a girl wearing a pink headscarf smiled at him:

> And generously, not glumly, not shyly, not stealthily, no, broadly – a real *smile*. […]. Then she said, 'you've got a nice car'.
>
> I'll be honest: I could not believe my ears. A nice car. I began to laugh. The traffic light turned to green […] I stepped on the gas and drove home, suddenly in a good mood […] – I thought, us and them, *my ass*, it could not be more peaceful than this. […] On the radio the suburbs of Paris were still burning, but my own city lay dignified in front of me. For how long? And will my car also go up in flames if it starts here?[3]

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1 "[K]unnen we niet gewoon verder op oude voet: lekker langs elkaar heen leven? Nee dus. Jammer." Martin Bril, "Meisje" (2005).

2 "[S]lecht humeur"; "de voorsteden van Parijs, waar weer duizend auto's waren uitgefikt". Ibidem. Bril is referring to civil unrest in France that started on 27 October 2005 when two teenage boys with a migrant background were accidently electrocuted while hiding from the police in a power substation. During the ensuing riots, cars and public buildings in the '*banlieus*' (depressed districts) of Paris and other large French cities were the main targets of the rioters.

3 "Royaal ook, niet zuinig, niet verlegen, niet besmuikt, nee, volledig - een echte smile. […] 'Je hebt een mooie auto', zei ze toen. Eerlijk is eerlijk: ik wist niet wat ik hoorde. Een mooie auto. Ik begon te lachen. Het verkeerslicht sprong op groen […] en ik gaf gas en reed naar huis, ineens voorzien van een goed humeur […] – wij en zij, my ass, dacht ik, vreedzamer dan dit kon het niet worden. […] Op de radio brandden de voorsteden van Parijs nog steeds, maar mijn eigen stad lag er waardig bij. Hoe lang nog? En zal mijn auto ook in vlammen opgaan als het hier bingo is?" Ibidem.

Bril's encounter with the girl with the pink headscarf followed the same pattern as many of the encounters between Muslim and non-Muslim characters in the novels, short stories and plays that I have discussed in this study. First a tension is created through a reference to social issues. The relationship between a 'Dutchman' and a 'Muslim' is not automatically peaceful and without its problems: the encounter between him, safely inside his car, and her, outside and a possible representative of the "chaos in the suburbs of Paris", is almost naturally charged. Next, there is the hope that the encounter does not necessarily have to lead to a violent clash of civilisations. After all, Bril and the girl are not completely different: they share a preference for the same car. At the same time, that hope is presented as almost an anomaly: Bril is surprised by the girl's smile and it is conceivable that the very thing that divided and joined them at the same time will be burned down. The encounter between the two different worlds that they represent remains, as Edward Said phrased it, a "dramatic event": if it is not because the 'Muslim' and 'Dutchman' each play their prescribed role, it is because of the remarkable fact that they do *not*.

Over the preceding chapters, I have observed this tension and hope, as well as the suggestion that an unproblematic encounter between a 'Muslim' and a 'Dutchman' is something of an anomaly, in the works of Kader Abdolah, Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza and Robert Anker. All of them have placed the encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims in the context of social issues, either through references in literary texts or through writing op-eds and columns about the same themes. While doing so, they have presented literature – and specifically their own literature – as a solution for social issues. This 'utopia of literature' can take the form of the necessity to write engaged literature, as we see first and foremost with Abdolah, and to a lesser extent with Anker. Benali and Bouazza chose the opposite (i.e. literary escapism): because they suppose literature to be strictly autonomous, it is precisely there that the faults that fragment society can be transcended. For all of the authors, however, writing itself neutralises the threatening clash of civilisations.

Despite this aim to transcend, the clash itself is the central plot in many of the literary works these authors have written. In their stories, there is a continuous strife between 'Muslims' and 'Dutch', the Islamic and the non-Islamic. These different categories are first and foremost placed opposite each other. As I wrote in the introduction, this need not surprise us. After all, friction is one of the main ingredients for an enticing and exciting story: communication breakdowns and failed attempts to make contact increase the reader's involvement in a story. And yet, in the way I have read these stories, this is not the main reason why these authors have adapted multicultural tragedies in their literary works. In Bouazza's and Benali's stories, a certain exorcism seems to take place. They

consciously conjure up the ghosts of encounters between 'the Netherlands' and 'Islam' in the form of clashes and tragedies in their novels, short stories and plays. These ghosts are then made to put on a burlesque or grotesque performance, which exposes the foolish and dazed nature of a notion like 'the clash of civilisations' and how it is really just a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the other two authors' works, the confusing and disorienting encounters between Others mostly serve to tell a story of pain and loss (Abdolah) or to show the necessity (and at the same time impossibility) of having something to hold onto, a moral compass in postmodern urban society (Anker).

Just as the authors present literature as an exception, a 'refuge', as Benali phrases it, where the clash of civilisations that has society in its grip can be escaped, moments of unproblematic coexistence between the Islamic and the non-Islamic are anomalies in these stories: secluded spaces, high up in the mountains or deep in the desert, visions and drugs-instilled flushes, a state of mind… These represent the cultural mediation or the hybridity that the authors claim to strive for. They mostly serve as the outcome of a dialectic plot, a happy end in which everything comes together. However, they are exceptions to such a great extent that they become utopias, always just beyond what would really be possible.

In this study, I have analysed how four representative Dutch literary authors have contextualised and recontextualised the relationships between 'Muslims' and 'the Dutch' between 1990 and 2005. In summary, I have observed the following. First, all these authors have presented their work as an attempt to mediate between 'Muslim' and 'Dutch' (or non-Muslim), even if this was sometimes at odds with their conviction that literature should be autonomous – which in the case of Benali, Bouazza and Anker implies that literature should be read and written for 'purely literary' rather than moral or political reasons. Second, the 'Islamic' and 'non-Islamic' (often 'Western') have been presented as opposites and placed in relationships full of strife, friction and clashes, though the authors sometimes attempt to neutralise these antagonistic relationships by representing them in the form of caricatures. Third, these works testify to a pessimistic worldview in which the two worlds will, almost inevitably, clash, whether it is out of necessity or not and despite the utopian hybrid that the work itself forms and which is imagined within the text. I will expand upon these conclusions in the coming paragraphs, but first I will shortly comment upon the limitations of this study in time and scope and make some recommendations for future research.

2. Beyond the scope of this study

2.1. The authors after 2005

I have not given an inclusive overview of these four authors' oeuvres – nor did I intend to. This study does not contain four monographs, but rather four case studies into the ways these authors have integrated the relationships between 'Islam' and 'Dutch society' into their work. Because of this thematic angle, the authors and their work might have come to stand in a slightly deforming light: only one aspect of their undoubtedly much broader authorship has been dealt with. And yet my analyses have arguably shown that their work could not "just as well [have been] about kidney beans", as Benali once claimed about his debut. The theme of an encounter between these two worlds is a rich source of what Stephen Greenblatt calls *social energy*. Each of the four case studies has shown how Dutch literature around the turn of the century was used for the circulation of this energy and how this use can be embedded in an author's *posture*.

Another limitation of the scope of this study is, naturally, the time period. In the introduction I argued why the period between 1990 and 2005 can be seen as a transitional moment in Dutch dealings with Islam and Muslims: by around 1990 it had become clear in the Dutch public debate that Islam was not only something that happened 'far away' but it had also become a local phenomenon. Between 1990 and 2005, the debate mostly centred on whether this local phenomenon could be part of Dutch society. From around 2005, debate has coalesced around the idea that there is only space for Islam in Dutch society if it somehow adapts to its 'new' surroundings. One could link the preoccupation with space and place in many of the texts discussed in this thesis with this debate, as well as the notion of a hybrid utopia. While the Netherlands was busy discussing the possible place Islam could be assigned in society and whether Dutch society and Islam were at all compatible, Dutch literature experimented with the very same questions and created possible spaces for the Islamic as well as possible Dutch–Islamic hybrids.

If we step beyond the scope of the study and take a short look at the work that these authors produced after 2005, we can see both continuities and rifts. Kader Abdolah took his programme of cultural mediation to a grander scale when in 2006 he published a box set containing two books. In one of these books, *The Messenger. A Narration* (*De boodschapper. Een vertelling*), Abdolah wrote a biography of the prophet Mohammed. The other book, *The Koran. A Translation* (*De Koran. Een vertaling*), is, despite its title, an adaptation of the Koran in which the original text is explained, abridged and simplified. In a foreword, Abdolah claimed that he "wanted to make the Koran accessible to all

Dutch people".[4] In 2009, he published *This Beautiful Land* (*Dit mooie land*), a final selection of the weekly "Mirza" columns he wrote for *de Volkskrant*. Two years later, he quit writing that column and his presence in the public debate was somewhat diminished. His next publication, *The Crow* (*De kraai*, 2011), was the Book Week's annual publication, given to everyone who visited a bookstore during that week. In it, Abdolah filled in a blank in his work. Up to that point, his books had dealt with people who resisted the regime of the ayatollahs as they lived their lives in either Iran or the Netherlands. In *The Crow*, he wrote about the flight itself, narrating the wanderings of an Iranian refugee through Turkey. Once again his text stood in an intense intertextual relationship with Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*. That same year he published *The King* (*De koning*, 2011), a lengthy novel in which, just as in the 2001 novella of the same name, the story of shah Nasser al-Din (1831-1896) is told, albeit in a more realist manner. Thus, cultural mediation, the plights of refugees and Iranian history remained constant factors in Abdolah's work. (However, they are absent in Abdolah's 2012 book, *Sea Lettuce and Alice's Spoons* (*Zeesla en de lepels van Alice*), a survey of contemporary Dutch engineering.)

As I noted in Chapter 4, Abdelkader Benali ceased to write about encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims from 2004 onwards. For a while, he concentrated on literary experiments instead. His three following novels were the science fiction thriller *Feldman and I* (*Feldman en ik*, 2006), the strongly magical realist *The Eternity Artist* (*De eeuwigheidskunstenaar*, 2007) and *The Marathon Runner* (*Marathonloper*, 2007), which starts out as an essay on running but slowly turns into a dark psychological novel.

With the 2008 publication of his novel *Munya*, a burlesque story of a naïve journalist who gets lost in the Middle East and ends up staging his own kidnapping in Lebanon, he returned to his old theme of the "myth of the clash of civilisations", now set in a more international venue. With the 2009 novel *My Mother's Voice* (*De stem van mijn moeder*), his earlier themes of the life and times of a Moroccan migrant family in the Netherlands and the difficult relationship between a Moroccan migrant father and his son growing up in the West also made a comeback. In his 2010 novel *The Sand Runner* (*Zandloper*), about a novelist who returns to Morocco (his country of birth) to train as a marathon runner, he combined these earlier themes with what seems to have become a new, important trope in his work: running.

In the meantime, Benali has become something of a media personality. He was the subject of two documentaries and presented two book programmes on television, as well as a programme on African football (about which he also

4 Kader Abdolah, *De Koran. Een vertaling* (2006): 7.

wrote a slightly fictionalised journalistic report, *The Road to Cape Town* (*De weg naar Kaapstad*, 2010)). He also remained a strong presence in the public debate: he continued to write op-eds, no longer just commenting on the relationship between Dutch society and its Muslim and Moroccan communities, but on relations between the West and the Muslim world in general. In a 2006 collection of emails between Benali and Dutch critic, author and publicist Michaël Zeeman, *Who Could Resist Paradise* (*Wie kan het paradijs weerstaan*), the author occasionally commented on these issues as well, in between literary gossip, ruminations on art and literature and private issues. Most notably in this light, he became an accidental reporter from Beirut during the 2006 Israeli bombings of Lebanon. These reports were collected in *Messages from a Beleaguered City* (*Berichten uit een belegerde stad*, 2006), which was re-published, together with other travel reports, in *East=West. Travels through the Arab World and the West* (*Oost=West. Reizen door de Arabische wereld en het Westen*, 2011).

In light of my conclusions in Chapter 4, one of his most interesting publications after 2005 was *Nobody's Grammar* (*De grammatica van een niemand*, 2008), an essay in which he repeated his notion of literature as a "refuge" from the "identity industry" of Dutch society. In this essay, Benali maintained that a book has the power to turn its reader into a "nobody" and thereby liberate him or her from religion and a society in which "[c]hildren learn from a young age to sharply demarcate their identities with great words, aided by what the media whisper in their ears".[5]

Hafid Bouazza remained present in the public debate as well, mainly through writing op-eds in which he continued to vent his spleen about Islamic vices and the follies of Dutch cultural relativism. Some of these writings were published in his non-fiction collection, *Pagan Joy* (*Heidense vreugde*, 2011), together with essays on arts, drugs and women. Besides these essays, he concentrated on translating Arab literature, mostly erotic and pornographic poetry, for his Arabian Library: *To Kiss the Sun at This Hour of the Night* (*De zon kussen op dit nachtuur*, 2006), *For What Has Yet to Come* (*Om wat er nog komen moet*, 2008) and *Nothing But Sin* (*Niets dan zonde*, 2012). In combination with co-editing an anthology of comics, essays, fiction and poetry about alcohol and drugs, *High* (*Roes*, 2010), these translations further established his reputation as a libertine. In an exchange of letters with famous Dutch poet Gerrit Komrij, published first in the *NRC Handelsblad* and later collected in *Now I'm Angry With You, I Embrace You* (*Nu ben ik boos, ik omhels je*, 2009), Bouazza also emphat-

5 "[N]iemand"; "Kinderen leren al op jonge leeftijd hun identiteit scherp af te bakenen met grote woorden, met behulp van wat ze door de media krijgen ingefluisterd." Abdelkader Benali, *De grammatica van een niemand* (2008): 43.

ically positioned himself as a freethinker as well as a sort of latter-day Byronic artist preoccupied with death, drugs and the autonomous world of art. In the novella *Mockingbird* (*Spotvogel*, 2009) he returned to his old ironic play with autobiography and exotic authenticity.

Robert Anker became the 2008 Amsterdam City Poet, which led to the publication of a series of commissioned poems, *The Poet and the City* (*De dichter en de stad*, 2009). After publishing a novella about friendship, *Alpenrood* (2008), he continued to write novels and poetry in which contemporary, controversial issues regularly popped up, as they did in the work I discussed in Chapter 6. In *Nieuw-Lelievelt* (2007) he once again wrote about the demise of old morals, this time from a wider perspective in a story about a woman whose life reflects the history of the Netherlands since 1945. In contrast to Anker's male main characters, who, as we saw in Chapter 6, are usually trapped in a downwards moral spiral, this woman remains a morally upright person throughout her life.

It is noteworthy that Anker's collection of short stories, *On Fortuyn and Love* (*Fortuyn en de liefde,* 2009), contains no reference to the murdered anti-Islam politician Pim Fortuyn. Instead, the "Fortuyn" of the title refers to a seventeenth-century Amsterdam warehouse of that name. However, giving his book this title is an example of the way Anker likes to titillate his readers with loaded *signal words*, as we also saw in Chapter 6. Anker did seem to take on the subject of Pim Fortuyn in *Dog of War* (*Oorlogshond*, 2011), in which a Latin teacher becomes a populist politician and the separatist leader of the eastern Netherlands. The novel contains clear references to the kind of contemporary xenophobic populism that has been on the rise in the Netherlands ever since the turn of the century.

In his poetry too, Anker continues to comment on the moral emptiness of modern times. *Gemraad slasser d.d.t.* (2010) testified to despair about the indifference of contemporary society, while *In the West, the Last Trans* (*In het westen, de laatste trans*, 2011) addressed the crisis in Western culture and the notion that authenticity no longer exists precisely *because* so many people are obsessing over it. As in the works Anker published before *Hajar and Daan* (*Hajar en Daan*, 2004), Muslims occasionally appear in this later work, but the encounters between the Islamic and the non-Islamic are not a central issue in the works he published after 2005.

2.2. The continued circulation of social energy

This study is the first in which a thematic approach was the point of departure for research on the ways in which Dutch literary works might function as inter-

ventions in the public debate about multiculturalism, migration and relations between Western societies and their Muslim communities. It has, of course, not been possible to take all factors into account. To conclude that there has been a circulation of social energy within and around a literary work is to claim that this work has "the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder".[6]

My analyses have shown that this is the case for these four authors' oeuvres, but additional research must ask whether this capacity has been fulfilled. This question can only be answered through research that focuses on the reception of these literary works. I do *not* (only) mean research into the ways in which newspaper and magazine critics have written about these authors and their work; after all, these offer a limited view on how a novel has really been received. The more copies Abdolah has sold of his novels, the more negative his reviews have been; this may be seen as a confirmation of Bourdieu's clichéd notion of the market of symbolic goods, but it gives us very little insight into how Abdolah's novels have been read in general. Research is needed on how these works have been read by non-professional readers who have bought and read the books of these popular writers in large numbers. What reading strategies are applied to these books? Which cognitive frames are activated if an author possesses an 'exotic' name, when the public debate is referenced in the literary work, by portraying the clash of civilisations in the relationship between characters, or by any carrier of social energy, within and outside the literary work?

As I wrote in Chapter 2, the circulation of social energy has no point of origin, no moment of beginning, and its carriers (the words and concepts) have no original meaning. However, this means that it can have no endpoint either; we cannot see the literary work as a moment in which the circulation coagulates or as an artefact in which meaning is recorded once and for all. The circulation continues because the works are read. Of course, my reconstruction of the dialogical space in which the works originate and my analysis of the rhetoric of these texts gives insight into the space and the way in which they could have been received.

However, an important question remains: we can observe that an author ironises his background, dramatises a chauvinist Western perspective or writes in bad faith, but who, besides the literary scholar and some critics, realises this or pays attention to it? It may be difficult to imagine from within the field of comparative literature, with its 'informed readers' and broad arsenal of methods of text analysis, but some people have read Bouazza's work as authentically Arabic

6 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1997): 6.

and even as autobiographical (as can be observed in several reviews quoted in Chapter 5.). How many readers have pitied the poor guest worker Humayd Humayd[7] or have perceived father Mansoer not as a caricature, but as a realistic representation of 'the' fundamentalist and Daan Hollander as a trustworthy commentator on the Enlightenment?[8] These are questions that deserve further research.

3. Clashes and authenticity in the authors' *posture*

The clash between the Muslim world and the West is an important part of how these authors formulate their authorship (albeit to a lesser extent for Anker). How have these authors tried to mediate between 'Islamic' and 'Dutch' in their works and authorship? Abdolah goes as far as to present this clash as the *raison d'être* for his authorship. He sketches a deep gap between 'East' and 'West', rendering his culture of origin and Western culture as monolithic unities. At a certain moment, this gap becomes so fundamental that Abdolah, because of his Muslim origins, ends up placing himself among Islamist terrorists. At the same time, this enables him to present himself as a cultural mediator, a *pars pro toto*, who can speak on behalf of the East to the West. Thus, he implies that people should read him and take him seriously because his literary work is the voice of the 'alien' – and increasingly, this means 'Islam' – in Dutch literature. Abdolah presents the fundamental differences between 'East' and 'West' as *idées reçues*, as the passive, timeless Orient versus the progressive, modern West. These fundamental differences make clear just how special moments in which 'East' and 'West' come together are and Abdolah presents his work as one of the few instances in which this happens.

Abdelkader Benali sketches a similar gap between the West and the Muslim world, but for him this gap is not caused by the idea that 'East' and 'West' are necessarily different. According to Benali, those worlds come into existence the moment people start to stress the differences between them. This happens in the "identity industry" of Dutch society when people are being coerced to choose, says Benali. It is this coercion that results in what he calls "the myth of the clash of civilisations". He opposes this with his own narrative of escape, in which he could escape both the "identity industry" as well as his all-too-narrow Muslim origins through writing literature. Literature bridges the gap between 'East' and 'West' by unmasking them and creating a "refuge" where one does not have to choose between "here" and "there" but can move beyond such categories. In

7 Cf. footnote 150, p. 184.

8 Cf. the op-ed by Gerry van der List that I mentioned in the last chapter. Gerry van der List, "Superieure beschaving" (2004).

Benali's emphatically postmodern discourse there is no place for the "truth" that is so important for Abdolah's 'witness literature'. His work takes no position; it evades the coercion to take a position.

Something similar can be seen with Hafid Bouazza, albeit to a more radical extent than with Benali. In his literature, Bouazza not only creates caricatures of a mutual "stranglehold" with which he claims that 'Muslims' and 'Dutch' succeed in *othering* each other continuously, but he does so in his contributions to literary and public debates as well. He consciously assumes the *posture* of an elitist eccentric because in his view of modern-day society, one can only escape its foolishness by retreating into the exceptional position of the dandy and writing from an "autonomous world" of drug abuse and art. As a product of imagination, literature can function as a similar flight from the silliness of reality.

Robert Anker projects his own personal history onto the clash of civilisations. In his writings, the Muslim world becomes like the village of his youth, a place that offers certainty and something to hold on to but that nevertheless has to be left behind. At the same time, his work can be characterised as a 'literature of homesickness' in which characters continuously long for something that has been sacrificed to move forward, but that has left behind an emptiness that cannot be filled. Furthermore, in the confrontation between the West and the Muslim world, Islam offers a militant version of village life with its steadiness and moral clarity, as well as a possible return to purity and authenticity.

In all these authors' literary works, the encounter between the Islamic and non-Islamic is embedded in a personal myth of the possibilities that literature offers to both authors and readers. In this myth, literature functions as a solution for social issues. Abdolah presents himself as an engaged author who contributes to the mutual understanding between communities through his literature: he believes that the tensions in society will decrease if people learn more about the 'other world' and his work offers readers the chance to do so. Benali and Bouazza, on the other hand, deny any engagement in their literary work. According to them, it is precisely because of literature's autonomy that it can fulfil its social role as an escape from and intervention in a society in the grip of essentialism. For Anker as well, literature offers the possibility of an intervention: by portraying the clash of civilisations, the author can question it, forcing his reader to ruminate on the consequences of mass immigration, the ethnic melting pot of the modern city and whether Muslims form a threat to 'our' way of life.

In other words, these authors' *postures* present writing as a utopian act through which 'East' and 'West' can meet. This happens in different ways: Abdolah mixes literary traditions; Benali uses an abundant mix of voices, worldviews and styles; and Bouazza and Anker describe and sometimes mix Western and Eastern dreams and stereotypes. Interestingly enough, it was most-

ly after 9/11 that this utopia became an explicit part of these authors' stories. The contradictions that dominate society are being transcended in the bookcase in which Eastern and Western literature are juxtaposed (Abdolah); a story or play of lies in which those contradictions become irrelevant (Benali); the mirage that is a manifestation of the West in the East and vice versa (Bouazza) and an advanced state of mind that negates the separation of the Muslim world and the West (Anker). Within each of these authors' oeuvres, this image functions as a *mise en abyme* for their opinions about the clash of civilisations and how notions of authenticity influence it.

Authenticity is a central issue for Abdolah. His work springs forth from his origins and it testifies to "the truth" (e.g. the fate of refugees, *allochtones* or the victims of the Iranian dictatorship). Because of this, his work tends to be rather unequivocal and programmed. Abdolah is not an author who will recycle the public debate about Muslims and Islam in his work and ironically quote a variety of voices while doing so. His work is first and foremost a proclamation, itself a voice in the public debate, just like his columns and essays. And that voice's main point is that an encounter between Muslim culture and Dutch culture might be culturally enriching, but it is first a difficult affair. In the image of the bookcase, which suggests juxtaposition without mixing, we recognise the author's essentialist opinions about 'East' and 'West', or 'Islam' and 'the Netherlands'.

Benali, on the other hand, provocatively disrupts the notion of speaking the truth. He opposes the ways in which society coerces a person to choose sides by playing with his origins. The author admits that he sometimes plays the role of the exotic author to get more attention, but this admission is so blatant that he mainly seems to be putting forward the proposition that he is sabotaging the "identity industry" this way. Benali's literary work, with its many lies and masks, is in line with this *posture* of the author as a saboteur. Unreliable narrators, cheats, made-up stories: these all represent his ironic conclusion that only the lie can really lead to liberation (i.e. the possibility to tell one's own story).

Where Abdolah embraces essentialism, Bouazza *feigns* essentialism, even more so than Benali. On the one hand, Bouazza fights the coerced authenticity with which people of Muslim descent are confronted in Dutch society, while on the other he continuously surrounds himself with an air of authenticity. This can be seen as an attempt to reveal how no one in Dutch society can see clearly, from which he theatrically distances himself. He poses as an 'authentic' Eastern author, uses a language and style that could easily be mistaken as exotic, and often deals with fairy-tale Oriental countries in his work, full of people flying on carpets, perverse erotica and backwards cultures. At the same time, he blatantly presents this presumed authenticity as an ironic joke, meant to fool the naïve among his readers. The author never ceases to stress that those who take a closer

look will perceive that his exotic style is not foreign, but is part of a Dutch tradition. And the themes are 'authentically' Western too: dream images that stem from Orientalism and tell us more about the Westerner's fantasies than about the Orient itself.

Thus, at first his literary project seems to be an unmasking of Western stereotyped images of Muslims and Arabs. Clearly recognisable references to the public debate and colonialist discourses seem to suggest that Bouazza's texts are meant to be emancipatory. When analysed more closely, however, this is not the case. The Occidentalist gaze of his Muslim characters is just as deforming as the Western exoticism he attacks. His texts are not emancipatory, but negations of the need for emancipation: his satires know only perpetrators, no victims. Every unmasking of a stereotype in his work comes with a reification of the same stereotype: Muslims are lazy, evil and barbaric and Westerners are loose, naïve and full of cultural relativist self-hate. There is a fundamental ambiguity in these texts. One mask after the other is torn away, but no 'true' face is ever found. Bouazza's work exposes nothing, it only veils: the reader is merely invited to enjoy the aesthetic qualities of these veils, represented in baroque mirages, since there is no 'true' essence hiding behind them anyway.

Like Benali and Bouazza, Anker seems to observe that there is no realness anymore, just the appearance of authenticity. However, unlike the work of the two other authors, his work is not a merry "religious musical chairs" or a celebration of a life without certainties. In his contributions to the public debate, Anker has claimed that it would do everyone good to embrace postmodern city life with its fragmentising effects and without god or commandments. However, we find a much more ambiguous attitude in his literary work: the city is an alienating environment where authenticity is impossible, so his characters lose their way both literally and figuratively. A life of lies and masks, which Benali and Bouazza find so liberating, leads for Anker to soulless men without qualities searching for themselves (in fact, for *any* self), a search that ultimately leads the story to a kitsch *new age*-like ending. Thus, Anker's works – and most notably *Hajar and Daan* – can be read as denouncing the prostitution of authenticity that can be found in Benali's and Bouazza's work. With his 'literature of homesickness', Anker can be positioned between Abdolah, for whom essentialism functions as something to hold onto in the encounter between the Islamic and the non-Islamic, and Benali and Bouazza, for whom authenticity has become impossible and irrelevant in the encounter between Islam and the West.

4. The clash of civilisations in literature

As I wrote in the introduction, this study is meant to be a report on *othering* – not in the sense that it analyses how 'the Muslim' is made into an Other of the Western self in Dutch literature, but as a process of continuously negotiating the borders between the categories of possible dichotomies. In this process, 'the Muslim' and 'the Dutchman' (which in itself is a strange dichotomy, since one implies a national and the other a religious category) are presented as each other's mutual Other. So what do the literary encounters between the 'Islamic' and the 'non-Islamic' that take place in these authors' work claim, imply or suggest about the possible identities of 'Muslims' and 'Dutch'? In these stories, *othering* occurs because there is a continuous demarcation of borders: between 'the Netherlands' and 'Islam', 'alien' and 'familiar', between or 'us' and 'them' – going on in these stories. For instance, the refugees in Abdolah's early stories discover that there is no place for the Muslim "tradition" beyond the border of the West. The same observation is made by the strict Muslims in Benali's work when they say: "and yet, a line needs to be drawn". These characters use Islam to draw a line between a safe "inside" and a hostile "outside" in an attempt to prevent their sons from getting alien ideas that will annul their fathers' power. Bouazza introduces similar characters: Muslims who cannot and will not concern themselves with the culture and society of the country in which they live. In a novel like *Paravion*, the paradoxical nature of their life, in which they have migrated to another country but refuse to cross a "mental border", is stressed and exposed as a refusal to accept that they have become hybrid by settling in another culture. And in Anker's *Hajar and Daan*, the characters are confronted with the "limits of a meddlesome morality" that makes it impossible for a Dutch man to have a relationship with a Muslim girl. Borders (mental or real), lines and limits (for which the same word, "grenzen", is used in the Dutch texts): they all carry the connotation of transgression, the notion that the person who crosses them has entered a "depraved borderland".

Thus, the way these stories are constructed offers little hope that the encounter between the Islamic and the non-Islamic will have a happy end. In Abdolah's work, 'Islam' and 'the West' virtually exclude each other; just as in his op-eds and columns, he continuously presents Orientalist and Occidentalist stereotypes as trustworthy representations of reality. Naïve, veiled women clash with exhibitionist homosexuals, a conservative, religious elder generation clashes with progressive, secular youngsters, and brave communist partisans clash with fanatical fundamentalists. Because of the sharp demarcations between 'Islamic' and 'non-Islamic' in these stories, his characters' struggles to find a place for the Islamic in the Netherlands or the non-Islamic in Iran becomes a central theme in his

work. This leads to an identity crisis: characters in exile in the Netherlands frenetically try to show that there is no trace of the 'Islamic' left in them (in other words, that there is a place for them in the Netherlands). In Iran, the introduction of foreign, unclean technology and ideologies leads to disapproval and even violence.

In Benali's work we see something similar, but this time it is represented ironically, often by taking this mutual exclusivity to absurd extremes. The author fills his stories with characters who demand that clear choices be made, characters who patrol like border guards along the difference between 'us' and 'them'. Their worldview is represented in spatial metaphors such as "inside" and "outside" or "here" and "there": however, this carefully constructed, demarcated and well-ordered world will ultimately fall apart. The encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims lead to a fragmentising of both groups' clear-cut worldviews. In the ensuing chaos (i.e. the disorientation of what Bhabha calls the "'In-between' space") the discourse of origin loses its validity: the prayer has become meaningless and the words that once gave life meaning have become "weak and washed-out". As a reaction to this, he stresses the importance (but also the impossibility) of creating an autonomous identity: the fluid identity of the actor and liar who are able to "rewrite history" and are no longer determined by essentialist notions of 'us' and 'them'.

If there is one defining trait in the stories that Benali published between 1990 and 2005, it must be their polyphonic nature: the characters with their obsession for borders are opposed by Benali's "gurgling melting pot of styles". From children's songs to the work of Sayyid Qutb, the author includes echoes of a wide range of public domains in his work and deforms them into an absurdist staging of the multicultural tragedy: fundamentalist ideologies clash with Western Islamophobia, personified by an imam who even fears the Dutch wind blowing through the chinks of his mosque and a stepfather who imagines himself to be a crusader in the neighbourhood mosque; the resentment among Muslims for the West clashes with Western xenophobic populism and is personified by a grown-up man playing king and a tricky talking dog. At the same time, Benali's burlesque stories have plots that, no matter how bizarre the characters and settings, tease out a certain empathy with the characters. They are all given their own motivations: from the Muslim father who becomes a fundamentalist so that he will not lose his grip on life in the alienating Dutch society to the Dutch man who is getting nervous because of the increasing number of 'tent dresses' in his city.

Thus, Benali's exposure of "the myth of the clash of civilisations" does not deny the fact that the societies in his stories are difficult places to live for characters of Muslim descent. The appealing 'identity as a mask' is contradicted by

the risk that unmasking carries for Muslim characters: loss of identity in a society in which they belong on the margins, are discriminated against and are rendered unable to speak up and rewrite history for real. With that, Benali's work tends to become a bit disengaged: the solution is found in a refusal to participate or in "quite simply just walk[ing] away from a situation that has become fruitless" like Alice in Wonderland. However, it is unclear how this can be done without a *Deus ex machina* or the utopian "refuge" of fiction; Benali leaves it up to the reader to answer that question.

For Bouazza, the encounter between the Islamic and the non-Islamic is first and foremost an encounter of masks. It is an encounter between stereotypes and grotesques that represent the relationships between 'Muslims' and 'Dutchmen' in stereotyped and grotesque ways: unable to really get to know each other, their eyes are deluded by prejudices about themselves and the others. By *image*-ining the other, they keep each other authentic – which in Bouazza's stories often comes down to a negative mirror image of oneself. Unlike Benali, Bouazza is not trying to expose the fact that autonomy or one's 'own story' can be found beyond this coerced authenticity. In a style that is permeated with irony, Bouazza places the collective, deforming *image*-ination – the reduction of the Other to an image – against a more positive form of imagination that causes categories such as 'Islam' and 'the Netherlands' to blend into hybrids. Despite the irony and his decadent *posture*, Bouazza's work seems to speak of a certain engagement and even a message: those who are not willing to go along with this hybridisation are proclaimed abject.

For Anker, the clash of civilisations functions as a repetition of the clash between city and village that plays such an important role in his work. The big city is continuously sketched as overwhelming: too much noise, many impressions and an enormous ethnic diversity. This creates a feeling that things are always on the edge of becoming *too* much. This feeling is also caused by Muslims, who represent youth and vitality in a threatening way and are thus not only part of city life, but form an opposite to the deprecate city and the decadence of postmodern Western culture as well. In my analysis of Anker's work, I have observed that because of this, Islam performs a similar function as the village: they both retain the steadfastness and authenticity that have been lost in modern life. The notion that Islam thus represents a militant version of the village is almost always embedded in his work, ascribed to white Western men who have lost their moral compass and fear losing their place in society, men who are possessed with a rage that borders on xenophobia. Because Anker uses almost literal quotes from op-eds (e.g. about the danger that *allochtones* will seize power in the West through demographic developments), these characters can be seen as commentaries on social issues.

In *Hajar and Daan* too, Anker includes all kinds of recognisable voices from the public debate about the presence of Muslims and Islam in the Netherlands. This is clearly meant to give the reader a sense of recognition and thus an engagement with the love story told in the novel. In other words, the work is given a certain urgency because it has an urgent matter as its main theme. It is remarkable that because of the way this is done, the notion that 'Muslims' form a threat to Dutch society is significantly less embedded than it is in his other works. By telling the story through an emphatically Dutch, Western perspective, 'the Muslim' remains the unknown Other, a threatening presence that could put an end to the lovers' happiness at any moment. At the same time, the encounter between Hajar and Daan itself is presented as a representation of the encounter between Islam and the West – and it is first and foremost Islam that complicates and ultimately sabotages it.

But Islam is not merely depicted as a negative force. It is, after all, in the Muslim world that the authentic experience that is so important to Anker's work takes place. It is there that Daan finds himself (*his* self) and "thinking without reason" becomes possible, which enables the "advanced state of mind" in which East and West can finally meet and the lovers can come together. At the same time, this return to authenticity is represented ironically and exposed as naïve Orientalism.

Thus, time and again there is the paradox that the clash of civilisation is the setting of these stories, in which the authors claim that they form a way out of this clash. Benali even makes this paradox between his literary project and his characters' opinions the subject of his literary work when he has a Moroccan father complain about an author of Moroccan descent writing in Dutch. It is striking that it is mostly the Muslim characters – whose strict Muslim character is often stressed by referring to the Islamic distinction between clean (Islamic) and unclean (non-Islamic) – for whom the borderland between Islam and the West is depraved. There are xenophobic Dutch to be found in these stories, but their role remains limited.

In Abdolah's work, the notion that there is no place for Muslims in the Netherlands is mainly the experience of Muslim characters. In Benali's work, the xenophobia of Rob Knuvelder and Floris-Jan is nothing compared to the Qutbian fundamentalism of Muslim 'border guards' such as father Mansoer in *Unclean* (*Onrein*, 2003) and Sidi Mansoer in *The Long Awaited* (*De langverwachte*, 2002). In Bouazza's work, the non-Muslim characters who resent foreigners, such as the Turk in *Apolline. A Play* (*Apollien. Een toneelstuk*, 1998), are presented as reasonable because the Muslims with whom they are dealing are so insufferable. And I have observed that the intertextuality with Romeo and Juliet in Anker's *Hajar and Daan* is an uneasy one because only Hajar's family

opposes the lovers' union (because of their Muslim convictions); Shakespeare's Capulets and Montagues hate each other equally.

5. The (in)escapable clash of civilisations

The possibility of writing as a utopian act, of language and literature as locations for the "beyond", can be recognised in the mixing of different styles and discourses (most obviously in the work of Benali and Bouazza). Time and again, language offers a way out when the mediation between the 'alien' and the 'familiar' is concerned. Benali includes many 'alien' words, terms and ideas in his work: bits of the Koran, terms from fundamentalist ideologies or Muslim notions about clean and unclean suddenly pop up in his texts. They are juxtaposed or even mixed with Dutch children's songs, passages from the Bible and ideas about being 'Dutch' so that it is no longer clear what is 'alien' or 'familiar' – and for whom. With Bouazza we see something similar: the 'alien' turns out not to be 'alien' at all and what seem to be exotic ideas, expressions or words turn out to be 'familiar' after all. In Abdolah's literary work, the 'alien' is mainly depicted to present the text itself as 'alien' (exotic, different) in the Dutch literary context. And in Anker's work, the 'alien' remains 'alien' because it is described from a Dutch perspective – although this perspective is sometimes reflected upon so that the notion that something is 'alien' itself may be alienated.

So, what forms of possible and impossible contact between the Islamic and non-Islamic are suggested in this mediation between 'alien' and 'familiar'? Although the preceding chapters paid much attention to the public debate that was their context, this has first and foremost been a study on fictional stories: on encounters between fantasy 'Muslims' and made-up 'Dutchmen' (which, some would say, is no less true for the Muslims and Dutchmen we find in the public debate). Thus, it does not provide insights into the daily reality of Dutch society around the turn of the century as much as it does the dreams and nightmares about the relationships between 'Dutchmen' and 'Muslims'. However, those dreams and nightmares do tell us something about the society in which they came about. It was, for instance, precisely the fictional nature of their characters that was used by some of these authors to show how, according to them, the 'Dutchman' and 'Muslim' that are created by a social process of *othering* are no less fictional.

In the chapter on Robert Anker, I cited Herman Pleij, who claimed that Dutch fourteenth-century theatre plays offer "literary solutions for the conflicts with the Muslim world". In the works that were discussed in this study, something similar is done. The authors themselves have offered the notion of a solution as a reading strategy in interviews, columns and essays: these works can be

seen as "literary solutions" for the tension in the relationship between 'Muslims' and 'Dutchmen' or 'Islam' and 'the West'. 'Islam' and 'the Dutch' come together in the fantastic and the imaginative. In this notion of a literary solution, we recognise the laboratory function that French philosopher Paul Ricœur ascribes to literature: the strange hybrids, talking foetuses, a half-white, half-black baby, Elysian gardens in Persian mountains, and stories that are made up, consist of lies, or are told from behind a mask. These are all outcomes of literary experiments with the confrontation between the 'Islamic' and the 'Western'. This is the utopian happy end mentioned before, in which the borders between both worlds fade away: in which hybrid identities can exist that transcend and even negate the differences between 'Muslims' and 'Dutchmen', between the 'alien' and the 'familiar'. However, the utopian character of these solutions (in both meanings of the words) places them outside reality: they can only exist in language or literature and can hardly be realised in society. They are a "beyond" that will always remain just out of reach.

However, might it not be precisely the impossibility of the solutions that are being offered that tells us the most about these authors' estimation of society? Does the fact that they stress the power of the imagination, however differently each of them does so, not mean that they argue for the necessity of thinking beyond the possibilities that are currently available? Self-consciously, all four of them present literature as a positive force in society, whether because it is an integral part of society (Abdolah) or rather because it stands *outside* society (Benali and Bouazza, with Anker somewhere in between). After all, these authors believe that literature can play a mediating role in society's conflicts. This is even true for those of them who deny the social relevance of literature: they locate this positive role of literature precisely in its lack of relevance.

Despite all the irony within and around the literary work, the perversion of social processes and the turning away from society – or, instead, despite all engagement, the urge to intervene in society – these authors' literary mediation can be summarised as follows: their work contains both the promise of unity and the observation that discord is omnipresent. The dream of an uncomplicated juxtaposition, or even mixing, alongside the nightmare of confrontation and clashes: this is the mirror that these works hold up to Dutch society around the turn of the century. Whether the mirror's reflection is deforming or not is the main question these works pose to their readers.

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